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OR, Blue-Eyed Belle of Bended Bow.

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AUTHOR OF "THE GIANT CUPID," "BLUE-GRASS
BURT," "CIBUTA JOHN," ETC.

CHAPTER I. FOUND: A BABY!

BENDED BOW, Colorado, at the time of which our opening chapter treats, was in its infancy, and, as a town, was among the wildest of the wild.

It was situated far up among the rugged mountains, in a charming, nature-favored spot, and upon the strength of several rich mines in the immediate neighborhood, was just beginning to enjoy a substantial "boom."

The town could boast of but one street, situate upon which were two rows of hastily-constructed shanties and weather-stained tents of various sorts and sizes.

The only building of any pretensions was the "hotel," which was of considerable size on the ground, and two stories high.

THE MAN FROM YELLOW PINE HAD CROSSED THE ROOM AND NOW LAID HIS HAND HEAVILY UPON THE MINE SUPERINTENDENT'S SHOULDER.

Over the door of this building, in red letters—large and rude, was the legend:

"EVERYBODY'S HOME."

And everybody's home it seemed to be in point of fact, for here of an evening the citizens were wont to congregate. It was a hotel, restaurant, dance-hall and bar-room combined.

Early one summer evening, just as a terrific thunder-shower was passing away, a man rushed into the bar-room of the "Everybody's Home" and exclaimed:

"Hey! feller-citizens, jest come out heur an' tune yer ears, an' tell me what sort o' animile it is I hear a-yowlin'!"

This man was one Rube Rittens, better known as "Red-top Rube," owing to the fiery color of his hair—an honest citizen of the town.

"What's in th' wind now, Rube?" some one asked.

"Wal," Rube returned, "I can't jest say whether it's in th' wind, pard, or in th' woods, or in th' canyon, nor whar it kin be; but, jest come out an' hear it."

The rain having about ceased, the crowd followed Red-top Rube out, and leading them a little distance away from the hotel, he bade them pause and listen.

"Thar!" he presently exclaimed, "d'ye hear that?"

True enough, a peculiar cry was plainly audible.

The men acknowledged that they heard it, and looked at one another for an explanation. What could it be? That query was plainly written upon each face.

"Sounds somethin' like er wildcat," one man ventured to remark.

"Wildcat be darn!" another exclaimed. "No wildcat 'bout that cry!"

"Sounds more like a tame cat," Red-top Rube averred.

"Yes, ye're right," the first speaker agreed; "an' yet it don't sound a mighty sight like either."

"I'll tell ye what that thing are, boys," suddenly declared another of the crowd, one Peleg Green by name; "it's a babby!"

"A what?"

"A babby."

"A babby! Oh! you're away off! How could a babby git 'way up heur? There ain't a shemale critter 'thin fifty miles o' heur, 'cept Aunt Dinah!"

The "Aunt Dinah" referred to was an old negro woman named Dinah Bragg, who had a little shanty of her own at Bended Bow, and who supported herself by doing washing and mending for the miners.

"That's all right," Peleg returned, "but I'm a-tellin' ye that's a babby's cry. Can't help it if there ain't a woman 'thin a thousand miles o' heur, that's a babby a-squallin'. You can't fool Peleg on that. I've got a famby of seven out East, an' ef any one of ye'd walked as many midnight miles with squallin' babbies as I have, ye'd know th' cry by heart."

"Wal," Red-top Rube decided, "thar's one way ter find out what it be, pards."

"Go an' see, eh?"

"Exactly."

"Come on, then," cried Peleg, "an' ye'll find that I'm right."

"Seems ter come from th' canyon, don't it?" Rube half inquired.

"It do, fer a fact. Shouldn't wonder if it wur down thar, on Canyon Trail, pards."

"Wal, we'll soon see. Come on!"

And they started.

"Canyon" Trail, as the name in itself explains, was a trail leading through the canyon, and the canyon in question ran its yawning length on the north side of the town, and was bridged at one point by a rude structure of wire and rope, secured to sturdy pines.

The trail led up from a valley some miles away, and was the shortest route of communication Bended Bow had to the outer world, for the wagon trail made a much wider circuit, and added a day's travel to the distance from Denver.

The canyon rejoiced in the name of Blue Stone Canyon, and the trail was not at the bottom of it, but ran along one side, and was barely wide enough in some places for two persons to walk abreast. It passed beyond the town for a quarter of a mile or so to the west ere it reached the level, and then turned and led back to the street near the Everybody's Home.

In the bottom of the canyon was a rapid stream, which flowed eastward and emerged into the valley where the trail branched off from the wagon route.

Red-top Rube, Peleg Green and the others advanced at once to the point where the bridge spanned the canyon, and there paused to listen again; but the water-course below, owing to the recent storm, was dashing on its way with a roar like the surging sea, and for some moments no other sound was heard.

Presently, however, again came the cry, and from a point almost directly beneath the bridge.

"By heavens! Peleg, I believe you're right!" Red-top Rube ejaculated, excitedly. "Come! let's git around an' down thar, boys, as soon's possible! Thar's a mystery heur as big as a hoss!

No use'n us all a-goin', though," he added, "fer we'll only be in one 'nother's way; so you come on, Peleg, an' th' rest kin stay heur. Say, kin ye git a torch?"

"Yes, there's one in my shanty," Peleg responded, and he darted away to get it.

His shanty was near by, and in a few moments he reappeared with a blazing torch in hand, when he and Rube started off; the others watching the light until it disappeared, and watching then for its reappearance in the canyon below.

The cry still continued to be heard, and all who listened were by this time convinced that Peleg Green was right—that it was indeed a baby. But, how had it come there? This was a question no one could answer, and impatiently they waited to hear from those who had gone down.

They had not long to wait, for Rube and Peleg made all possible haste, and ere long their torch was seen flashing along the trail below.

Peleg, carrying the torch, was in advance, but Rube was right at his heels, and ere long the cry again reached their ears above the roaring of the swollen stream.

Increasing their speed, then, yet advancing with every precaution against surprise or a misstep, they soon arrived at the spot whence the cries came, and there on the narrow ledge, close to the wall and wrapped in a thick cloak, lay—a baby!

No other being was near, save these two men who had just come upon the scene.

"What's th' find, pards?" came the cry from bridge above.

"We've found a baby," Rube shouted, in reply. "We'll be up thar purty soon. And then to Peleg he added:

"Pick it up, Peleg, bein's you've had experience in that line."

Rube took the torch, and Peleg picked the baby up.

"Ginger!" he exclaimed, "th' little cuss is soaked through an' through wi' the rain! It must been layin' heur durin' th' shower. Wonder how it kem heur?"

"Give it up! There's a mystery back o' this, Peleg."

"Kerrect fer ducats! Hush! ye brat, hush! Stop yer infarnel yowlin'! Don't ye know it's me's got yer? Hush yer mouth or I'll spank ye like blazes, as sure as ye'r a little angel!"

But the baby was not inclined to "hush." Instead, it sent forth cry after cry that made the canyon ring. Nor did it stop when the two men had ascended from the canyon and joined the crowd, nor until they had made their way to the hotel and entered the bar-room. Then, as Peleg threw aside the cloak and held the child up to view, it suddenly ceased its crying and began to look around, as though in search of some familiar face.

It was a pretty child, with golden hair, and eyes as blue as the summer skies, and it was apparently about one year old. Its clothing was not of the finest material, but was made in a manner that bespoke a tidy and pains-taking mother.

Whose child could it be? How came it there? Where was its mother—or the person who had left it where it was found? These questions and a hundred others were repeatedly asked, but none could be answered.

When the excitement began to subside, Rube Rittens spoke:

"Now, then, feller-citizens, what's ter be done wi' this youngster?"

"Give it to Aunt Dinah," some one suggested.

"Good idee!" assented Rube, and then he instantly added:

"But, pards, I want ter have it understood right from th' start that I don't intend ter give it to anybody. This baby is mine—mine by right o' first discovery, an' I've got my claim-stakes set. Th' find is mine. I'll keep th' little feller till called fer, an' if he ain't called fer—Wal, I'll continue ter keep him."

"Whar does my share come in?" asked Peleg.

"Oh! I'll 'low you ter be its nuss. Come, though, an' we'll take it down to Aunt Dinah right away. Th' little tenderfoot will be takin' cold an' gettin' the colic—then what would we do?"

The two left the bar-room, and the crowd fell to discussing the mystery, advancing every theory, reasonable and unreasonable, but no one guessed the truth. How could they?

In about half an hour Rube and Peleg returned, and it was noticed that both were smiling.

"Pards," Rube said, in suppressed tones. "Aunt Dinah says it's a—a gal!"

"Ther doost it are!"

"It is, fer a fact—a she gal! An' now jest trot yer carcasses up heur an' take a drink to that little cheerub's health. We know what her front name is, fer it is worked on her little dress. Ther handle is 'Belle,' an' now, pards, heur's to th' health, wealth an' long life of 'Blue-eyed Belle o' Bended Bow!'"

Every glass was raised, and the toast was sealed.

Next day search and inquiry were made for the person, or persons, who had left the baby in

the canyon, but nothing could be learned. Every means possible was tried to discover the child's parents, but in vain; and days passed into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, until eighteen years had passed away and no one could say whose child was the now lovely mountain maid.

CHAPTER II.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE.

"THAT sounds like a threat, Jared Kenneth!"

"No, it is no threat, but a plain fact. I love Blue-eyed Belle, and if I can win her to be my wife I mean to do it."

"Wal, now jest hear what I've got ter say:—I warn ye not ter put yerself in th' gal's way. She don't like ye, for she told me so; an', by th' Lord Harry, you sha'n't bother her. Besides, if it ever comes to th' question o' her gettin' married you ain't th' sort o' man I'd like to see her choose. Them's plain words, Jared, but Old Rube Rittens is a man that don't beat about th' bush, an' there ye've got the hull case."

Eighteen years, and what a change.

Bended Bow was now a thriving little city, and in place of the single street, with its double row of shanties and tents, there were streets in plenty and houses of substantial build. There was now a railroad within ten miles of the place, and a line of stages was run to connect with all trains. There were stores, schools, two churches, a bank and several fine residences, one of the latter being the home of Colonel Damon Dallas, owner of the Break o' Day Mine, one of the best mines in the State.

The Break o' Day was situated some little distance away to the south of the town, and the superintendent of the mine was one Jared Kenneth, a man about thirty-five years of age; tall, finely formed and good-looking.

Late one afternoon in the summer of 1883, when the mine had stopped work for the day, the superintendent was seated in his office, drumming idly upon his desk with a pencil. He had been trifling thus for some time, buried deep in thought.

Suddenly he sprang up and called:

"Jim, come here!"

In a moment a boy entered.

"Has Old Rube Rittens, the foreman, gone home?" Kenneth asked.

"Don't know, sir," answered the boy; "but I'll see."

"Do so; and if you find him, tell him I want him."

"Yes, sir."

The boy hastened away, and in a few minutes Rube Rittens entered the office.

If time had wrought a change in Bended Bow, so it had wrought a change in her original citizens—the few who remained.

Rube Rittens was now in his sixtieth year, though still a hale and hearty man, the lines of age were plainly visible in his honest face, and his hair, once so red, was now plentifully sprinkled with white.

"You sent for me, Mr. Kenneth?" he queried.

"Yes, Rube, I sent for you. I want to ask you once more for your daughter's hand."

"No use, Mr. Kenneth, no use. My answer now is th' same as it was t'other day: Blue-eyed Belle is not fer you."

"But, Rube, I—"

"Now, Jared Kenneth, look heur: you an' me has allus got along in a friendly way an' th' least said th' soonest mended. I tell ye you can't marry Belle. I spoke to her 'bout it t'other day, after you mentioned it ter me, an' there ain't th' shadder of a chance fer ye. Th' gal don't like ye."

"But, Rube, I like the girl—I love her, and with your consent I am sure I could win her love in return."

"An' my consent ye'll never git. Now, let's drop th' matter right whar it is."

"No, I will not drop it. I have asked your consent; you will not grant it; hence I shall strive to win her without it."

Here, then, followed the heated words with which this chapter opens, and the face of the superintendent turned red and his eyes flashed.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean jest what I say," Rube answered, firmly.

"Do you mean to say that I am not good enough for her?"

"Wal, if ye want me ter put it that way, yes."

From red, Kenneth's face turned suddenly to pale.

"By heavens!" he cried, "were it not for your age, I would strike you to the floor! I'll have you understand that I come of good family, and—"

Rube straightened up and interrupted:

"Now, Jared, stop right thar! I didn't come in heur ter quarrel wi' you, much less ter fight. I kem in because I was sent fer, thinkin' ye wanted ter see me in th' way o' business. You asked me a question an' I gev ye a squar' answer, an' right thar I wanted ye ter let th' matter drop, but ye wouldn't. Now, before it goes any further, I'll go."

"Stop! You have insulted me, Rube Rittens, and I demand an apology."

"Insulted ye! How?"

"By saying I am not good enough for that girl."

"I say so still; but, you're welcome to yer own opinion about th' matter. That's my 'pology. You may come of a good family; that's somethin' I don't know anythin' about; but if ye do ye're no credit to it, that I'll vow. An' now, if ye want ter knock old Rube down, don't let his age stand in yer way. Ye'll find that sixty years hev hardened his muscles instead o' weakenin' 'em." And standing erect, with his thumbs thrust under his belt, and his massive chest expanded, his appearance confirmed his words.

Jared Kenneth evidently realized it, too, for his next words were less aggressive.

"Well, well, Rube," he said, "don't let us quarrel. I asked you in here, and I was a little hasty in what I said. Let us drop that question for the present."

"That's all right," Rube responded, "but what's said, is said. I wanted ter drop th' matter at first, an' I'm willin' now; but it must be dropped fer good an' all. I never want ter hear of it ag'in."

"Rest assured, you shall not hear of it again from me. As you say—what is said is said, and so we'll let it stand. But, Rube, I've lately heard a little news in regard to that girl."

"Heard news, have ye? Wal, what is it?"

"Why, I've heard that Blue-eyed Belle is not your own child, but a nameless waif whom you found when she was an infant."

Old Rube's face grew hard and stern, and in his eyes gleamed a dangerous light.

"An' who told ye that?" he demanded.

"Oh! it does not matter just how I heard it; I merely would like to know whether it is true or not."

"Well, an' what if it is true? Come, now, out with it! what if it is true?"

"Well," returned Kenneth, with a show of more courage than he felt, "just this: I think you are straining a fine point when you say that I am not worthy of her, a nameless—"

"Stop right thar!" and Rube's hand fell upon his shoulder with a mighty clutch. "Say another word, an' by heavens I'll wring yer neck! It won't do fer you or any other man ter speak that way of Blue-eyed Belle in my hearin', an' don't ye fergit it! It is true that I found her when she wur little, but she bears my name now, th' same as if she wur my own blood, an' I'm heur to defend her wi' a true father's devotion. No matter where she kem from, she's as pure as an angel, an' she's not fer you while old Rube kin lift a finger!" And flinging the superintendent away from him, the old man left the office at once, pale with suppressed rage.

"Curse him!" he muttered, as he strode away toward the town, "if I'd stayed thar a minute longer I'd knocked him stiff!"

Jared Kenneth had grasped the railing to save himself from falling, and as he glared after the old man he ground his teeth in rage, while his hand flew to a revolver in his hip pocket, as though he would like to drive a bullet through his heart.

"Not good enough for the girl, am I?" he muttered. "We'll see about that! I'll humble her pride for her, and yours, too, Rube Rittens. You have set yourself squarely in my path now, and you've got to be put out of it. I'll not let you stand long between me and such a prize. That girl shall be mine at any cost."

"But for Colonel Dallas I would have discharged him long ago, for I plainly foresaw this 'ruption between us; and why the colonel is so determined that he shall stay, is something I cannot understand. I once tried to lead the colonel to discharge him, so that I might afterward work for his reinstatement, and thus gain his favor; but I soon found it would not work. The colonel has some interest in him, and his position is secure."

"It does not matter, though, for since I could not win the old rip's favor I will accept him as an enemy, and deal with him accordingly. He shall pay for laying his hand upon me, and the girl shall be mine!"

"Ah! here comes the colonel now."

A little later Colonel Damon Dallas entered the office.

He was about fifty years of age, of medium height, had clear, steel-like gray eyes, wore a full beard, and was passably good-looking. There was a certain something in his countenance, however, that was not calculated to beget confidence, though his name and social position were above reproach.

"Hello! Jared, what's up? You look as though you had been having a set-to with somebody. Anything been going wrong?"

"No, everything is all right, colonel. I've only had a few words with one of the foremen."

"Not with Rube Rittens? I just met him a moment ago, as I came around the bend there, and I thought he seemed a little excited."

"Well, yes, it was Rube; but it was of no account. Little jars will happen once in awhile."

"Has he been neglecting his work again?"

You know you mentioned him to me once in very unfavorable words."

"No, it was not that. Rube is all right in that respect now. It was a purely personal matter. But it was of no moment, and I am not sure but Rube got the best of the argument, so we'll say no more about it, if you please."

"Oh! all right. I didn't mean to be inquisitive, but thought Rube had been making trouble for you in some way."

"That's all right, Colonel Dallas; say no more about it."

The conversation then turned upon the business of the mine, and for an hour the two men were busily engaged.

At length the colonel rose, threw away a cigar he had nearly consumed, and was just on the point of turning to leave the office when there came a bright flash of light a short distance from one of the windows, instantly followed by a sharp report, and a bullet came crashing through the window and buried itself in the opposite wall.

Kenneth, too, was upon his feet at the moment, standing close to the colonel, and the bullet passed directly between them.

With a quickness born of experience in the wild West, both men sprung out of range, and both uttering an exclamation of surprise, drew their own weapons instantly.

"Was it intended for you? or me?" the colonel queried.

"Give it up," Kenneth returned. "It was a close call for either of us."

"You're right! And now the question is— who fired that shot?"

"I would give something to know. It would be something worth while to know which of us it was intended for, too."

Several seconds passed, but nothing more was heard, and Jared Kenneth stepped to another window and looked out with caution.

He was just in time. It was growing dark, but was still light enough for him to see objects quite distinctly, and on the opposite side of the yard in the rear of the office, and just disappearing through a small gate in the fence which inclosed the mine on that side, was a woman.

"By heavens! I'll catch her!" and as he uttered the words the superintendent darted out the front door and ran swiftly to the corner of the fence, but when he reached there the woman had disappeared as completely as though the ground had opened and swallowed her.

This was passing strange, for it did not seem possible that any one could get out of sight so suddenly; but she was not to be seen, and Jared returned to the office, his face not a little pale.

"Who was it?" the colonel asked, as he returned his revolver to his pocket.

"Who it was," Kenneth answered, "I do not know; but it was a woman."

"A woman!"

"Yes, a woman. I caught sight of her just as she was disappearing through the gate, but when I reached the end of the fence she was not to be seen."

"That is strange; where could she get out of sight so quickly?"

"You'll have to ask me something easier than that, colonel."

"Well, my boy, one thing is settled."

"What is that?"

"The shot was fired at you."

"At me? Why do you think so? It came about as near calling you as me."

"I know that; but, you see, there is no reason why any woman should desire to take my life."

Kenneth's face flushed a little.

"Nor do I know of any reason why one should want to kill me," he made reply. "I guess it is a 'toss up' between us, colonel."

"Well, it is no joke, and I'm going back to town. Are you going up?"

"Yes," answered the superintendent, "I am. Just wait a moment till I lock up."

Taking care not to place himself in full view again, Kenneth secured the windows, and then he and Colonel Dallas stepped out of the office together and Kenneth locked the door. Then they turned their steps toward, each trying to keep close to the other, so that none but an expert marksman could have fired at one without danger of hitting the other; and they walked thus by unspoken but mutual consent. Not knowing which the shot had been intended for led them to this measure of precaution; and thus each proved to the other his inquietude.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER SHOT.

RUBE RITTENS, meanwhile, had gone straight home.

He occupied a small house on a quiet street, and Dinah Bragg—"Aunt Dinah," the colored woman to whom he had intrusted little Blue-eyed Belle on the night of her mysterious coming to Bended Bow, now acted as his housekeeper. In fact she had been his housekeeper for many years.

Rube had early learned to love his little *protegee*, and finding that she did not get all the care and attention he thought she ought to have,

Aunt Dinah being busy at the wash-tub every day, he finally engaged the old "mammy" to keep house for him and give the child her whole attention.

When Belle began to walk and talk, Rube taught her to call him "daddy," and the name grew so familiar that she still continued its use. Nor did she yet know that he was not her father. Three or four years had passed ere she began to understand and inquire concerning her mother; and by that time many of those who had known of her finding in the canyon had drifted away, while in the minds of those who remained the circumstance was seldom recalled and never mentioned, there being plenty of other and newer topics, to claim attention and discussion. So, whenever the child questioned him about her mother, Rube's reply was always the same—a vague explanation that she was dead, and there the matter rested.

As the years rolled on and Belle grew older, Bended Bow was growing too, and at last the girl's history was almost forgotten. Everybody spoke of her as "Rube Rittens's girl," and the few who knew the secret could be counted upon one's fingers.

But the time had now come, as Rube plainly saw, when he must tell the girl the truth. The secret being known to Jared Kenneth, it was bound to spread, and he resolved to tell her all. It would be better for her to hear it from his lips, than from another's.

"Th' rascal!" he muttered, as he neared home, "I wonder who told him th' story? I'll have ter prepare th' leetle gal to hear it, now, fer he'll spread it around. Poor little Blue-eyes! I wonder if she'll think th' same of old Rube then? If I thought she wouldn't, by heavens I'd take her a hundred miles from here this very night! But no, she loves Daddy Rube too well to think th' less o' him."

When Rube approached the house the door was flung suddenly open, and Blue-eyed Belle sprang out to meet him.

If a handsome young woman ever lived, it was she. She was beautiful in every sense of the word—beautiful alike in form, face and disposition. She was surpassing fair, with wavy golden hair, flashing azure eyes, and features of the true Grecian type. Her form was fully developed, and she was a little above the medium height.

"Heigho, daddy!" she cried joyously, as she caught hold of Rube's arm, "you are a little late to-night. Aunt Dinah has been grumbling more than a little, too."

"Can't help it, Blue-eyes," Rube responded. "I've been a little behind-hand all day, and just as I was comin' away th' super' called me into th' office. But I'm heur now, baby, an' hungry enough I am, too."

"Well, come to supper, then, for it's all ready and waiting."

They entered the house, where Aunt Dinah was just pouring the tea, the fragrant odor of which was most inviting.

"Laws, Mars' Rube!" the old woman cried; "I done begin to think you forgot whar you live! Come, now, 'fore everything done be stone cold."

"All right, auntie; jest let me wash a little, an' then I'll be ready ter eat ye out o' house an' home."

Aunt Dinah was now an old woman decidedly. She was past seventy, and the greater share of the household work had long since fallen to Belle.

Rube soon performed his ablutions, and then all sat down to the humble but tempting meal.

It was soon noticed that Rube was not in his usual frame of mind, and after a time Blue-eyed Belle asked:

"What are you thinking about, daddy? I declare you are as sober as a judge."

"I'm a-thinkin' 'bout you, baby," the old miner answered.

"About me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm glad to know you *do* think about me, daddy; but, I can't see why it should make you appear so sad. Have I been doing anything to displease?"

"No, no, my gal, you've done nothin'; it's all been done by others. Come, though, finish your supper, an' then I'll tell ye all about it."

"All right. Don't think I'm going to let you forget, for I'm not."

After supper it was Rube's custom to go out for an hour or two, but on this occasion he settled down to stay at home. He had little to say, but sat in thoughtful silence while Blue-eyed Belle and Aunt Dinah cleared the table and washed the dishes.

When all was done, the girl drew up a chair close beside old Rube and said:

"Now, daddy, we're ready to hear what it is makes you appear so unlike your usual self."

"Wal, my child, I'll tell ye all. I think I'd orter told ye long ago, but I couldn't. I was afraid ye'd think th' less o' Daddy Rube if I did."

"You have done no crime?" and as she made the hasty inquiry, her face turned pale.

"No, my child," Rube quickly replied, "I have done no wrong to any man. If all men

wur as free o' crime as old Rube Rittens, this would be a happy world."

"Then what *could* make me think less of you? I am sure I love and respect you as a daughter should, and—"

"Yes, yes, Blue-eyes, I know ye do, I know it; but, s'posen it should turn out that old Rube *ain't* yer true an' real daddy, how—"

"You not my father?"

"Mars' Rube," cried old Dinah, starting up, "what you done sayin'?"

"This is what I'm sayin', Dinah," the old miner replied; "Blue-eyed Belle must be told at last that she is not my child."

"Not your child?" and the girl sprung to her feet, pale and trembling. "Who, then, am I? Tell me if you love me, daddy; tell me, tell me!"

"Alas! little Blue-eyes, I only wish I *could* tell ye."

"Then you do not know who I am? Oh! this is terrible! And my mother—you have often told me she is dead."

"So she is, as we believe; no one heurabouts ever seen her."

"And you never saw her? How, then, came I to you? and why have you so long kept this a secret from me?"

"Set ye down, Blue-eyes, an' I'll tell ye all, an' then blame me if ye will. I've done th' best I knowed, as—"

"No, no, daddy! I do not—will not blame you; you have been too good and kind to me, I know you have done only what was right. But—oh! it is terrible to learn now, after so many years of happiness, that you are not my own father!"

"But it is true, my gal, it is true. An' now listen: Eighteen years ago this summer you kem to Bended Bow, an' I have cared fer ye ever sence—with th' help o' good old Dinah heur."

"Dat am so, child," Aunt Dinah confirmed, "dat am so."

"But, how came I here? Who brought me to you?" Belle asked, impatiently.

"Nobody knows. One night I heard a cry somethin' like a baby, an' me an' Peleg Green—"

"Old Peleg, who lives across the canyon?"

"Yes, th' same old Peleg. He moved his fambly out heur a couple o' years later. Me an' him started ter find out what th' cry was. We soon found it kem from th' canyon, an' Peleg got a torch an' we went down along Canyon Trail, an' there we found you, wrapped in a big cloak an' wet through an' through with th' rain."

"But, how came I there?"

"Nobody knows."

A silence followed of several minutes' duration, broken only by the crooning of the old negro woman as she rocked to and fro in her chair.

Rube was the first to speak again.

"An' now," he said, "I s'pose ye most nat'rally want ter know why I have told ye this, Blue-eyes, after all these years, eh?"

"Yes, daddy, tell me all."

"Wal, th' reason is this: I've jest found that th' story has leaked out, an' sooner or later is bound ter reach ye; an' I thought it best to prepare ye fer it. I never told ye before, 'cause I was afeerd ye would think less o' me, an' *that* I could not stand; fer, little Blue-eyes, if ye wur my own flesh an' blood I could not love ye more, nor be a better father to ye than I have been."

Blue-eyed Belle was now in tears, and throwing her arms around the honest old man's neck she sobbed aloud.

"Nor could I love *you* more," she cried, "if I were your own daughter; nor do I love you less, now that I learn I am not. Let us be to each other the same as always."

"God bless ye, little Blue-eyes, God bless ye!"

"But, daddy," the girl suddenly asked, "how came you to call me Belle?"

"That name wur stitched on yer little clothes," Rube answered.

"And that was all—no other name?"

"That was all."

"And there was no other clew of any sort?"

"None at all. All there was was th' name o' 'Belle,' an' nothin' more; an' I called ye 'Blue-eyed Belle o' Bended Bow.'"

Still Aunt Dinah sat and rocked to and fro, mumbling softly to herself words that were unintelligible to the others.

Suddenly Blue-eyed Belle sprung to her feet with a wild cry, not loud, but one that came from the heart.

"My God!" was her cry, "I am without a name! No one knows who I am or where I came from; whether—whether—oh! my God! and I have this day promised to become the wife of an honest man. Oh! daddy, I was so happy, and I meant to tell you to-night; but now it can never be—never—never be!"

Rube was upon his feet in an instant, his face pale—his eyes flashing.

"You have pledged your hand in marriage, you say!" he cried.

"Yes, daddy; and you will forgive me, will you not? But has *he* not spoken to you about it? It does not matter now, though, for it can never—never be."

"Who is it?" Rube demanded. "Not Jared Kenneth?"

Belle was about to reply, but at that instant the report of a pistol was heard and a bullet snapped through a pane of glass, passed within an inch of the girl, and buried itself in the breast of the old negress.

With a cry of pain Aunt Dinah sprung up, tottered forward a few steps, and then fell prone upon the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE FRACAS.

"KENTUCKY JEAN, the Youthful Sport from Yellow Pine, are the name and title I lay claim to, gentlemen, and you've got it straight from headquarters."

On the main street of Bended Bow, on the site of the old hotel, was a new one, and the sign across its face was the same as of yore. The bar-room was fitted up in almost palace-like magnificence, and the Everybodys Home was still the most popular resort of its kind in the place.

The proprietor was a German, one Hans Keppleheim, who owned also the line of stages mentioned.

On the evening of which we write there was, as usual, quite a crowd in the bar-room, all awaiting the arrival of the stage from the last train.

In due time the stage was heard as it came thundering over the Canyon Bridge, (an iron bridge, substantial and strong, now stood in place of the old one of wire and rope,) and in a few minutes it stopped before the hotel and the passengers alighted.

Among them was one who would draw attention in any crowd.

He was a young man, not over nineteen years of age, with a beardless, boyish face, yet strong and clear-cut were his features, denoting strength and determination of character. He was wiry and supple in motion, and evidently was possessed of great physical strength. His complexion, owing to long exposure to the sunshine and storm of the Western mountains and plains, was rather dark, but his long hair was as yellow as gold and his eyes as blue as the heavens.

He was clad in a complete suit of the common cloth known as Kentucky jean, the coat being a short "cutaway," buttoned high up with a single button of solid gold, which was the only ornament he wore, except a pair of gold-mounted revolvers in his belt, if these could be called such.

His feet were small, and were cased in a neat pair of boots of the finest calf, while upon his head rested a broadbrim hat of fine white felt.

Altogether he was a noble-appearing youth, and one to command a second glance from the most careless observer.

As soon as he left the stage he sprung up the steps of the hotel porch, and entered the bar-room.

Advancing straight to the bar, he inquired:

"You the proprietor, sir?" addressing Hans.

"Ya, ya, mine frient," Hans replied, "dot vas me."

"Well, can you give me a room?"

"You pet my poots I can!" Hans declared.

"Vat kind of room you vants, hey?"

"Oh! I'm not at all fastidious in my taste, my good sir; all I want is a room with a bed and a chair, and space enough to kick off my boots in."

"All right. I got jüst vat you vants. I gif you number ten. Yüst wride your name in der pook."

"All right, my Teuton friend, give me the quill and I'll do as you say. I'm one of the most obliging fellows you ever saw."

The landlord quickly provided a pen, and the stranger wrote:

"JEAN GRANTLEY,

"YELLOW PINE, CAL."

There were two or three other passengers who registered, and then the landlord conducted them to the dining-room, where supper was waiting for any guests the stage might happen to bring.

When Jean Grantley returned to the bar-room, after having satisfied his inner man, the crowd had augmented its number until the room was comfortably filled.

As he entered by one door, there entered from the street a little girl, poorly clad, who held out her hand toward the crowd, asking alms. She did not seem to be more than six years of age.

One or two who sat near dropped a trifle of money into her palm, and there she stood, too timid to advance further into the room, awaiting to be noticed.

Jean Grantley was about to cross the room and speak to her, when two men who were seated at a table near to where she stood, motioned for her to approach.

Timidly the child did so, and one of the men gave her a piece of silver, while the other engaged her in conversation.

These two men were—Jared Kenneth, whom we have introduced, and one Willis Stanton, cashier of the Bended Bow bank.

Stanton was a man about thirty, of medium

height and good figure, and was quite good looking. His features were clear cut, and a heavy mustache became him well.

He it was who gave the child the piece of money, while Kenneth addressed her.

"Whose little girl are you?" he asked.

"My mamma's," was the innocent reply.

"But, who is your mamma?"

"I am not to tell."

"Not to tell! Well, what is your name, then?"

"My name is Bessie, sir. Please let me go, now."

"No, you cannot go yet. Where do you live? I never saw you here before."

"I don't live anywhere, sir. Mamma says we've got no home. But, you must let me go. Mamma said I must not talk with any one."

Only a child, not more than six years of age, as we have said, and certainly not over seven: yet she talked more like a woman grown. And as she spoke she gently tried to disengage her arm from Kenneth's hand.

"No home! and your mamma says you are not to talk!" the mining superintendent exclaimed; "what mystery is here?" and he turned to Stanton for reply.

"You ask me too much," the young cashier answered, indifferently, as he sipped his wine and waited for the other to resume their game at cards. "Still her face reminds me of some one I have seen," he added, as he looked at the child more closely.

"There is a mystery here," Kenneth declared, "and I'm going to know more about this little chick."

Just then Colonel Damon Dallas entered.

"Ah! what have you there?" he inquired, as he paused and looked at the little girl.

"Sit down," said Kenneth, as he drew out a chair, and added: "Why, this is a little waif who has drifted here from some place or other, and there seems to be a mystery about her. She says she has no home, and that her mamma says she mustn't talk. What do you think of such a story?"

"Why, it does seem to smack a little of the mysterious, true enough," the colonel agreed.

"But what are you going to do with her? Why don't you let her go?"

"Please, sir, make him let me go," the child beseeched, now crying.

"Yes, let her go," said Stanton. "This game is getting cold."

"Not till I know more about her," Kenneth declared. "There's a mystery back of this, and I'm bound to find it out. Now, my little cry-baby," pulling the child around toward him none too gently, "tell me what your name is or I'll pull your ear!"

"Oh, please, sir, let me go! I *did* tell you my name; it is Bessie; and my mamma says it's all the name I've got. Please let me go."

That part of the bar-room where these men were seated was an extended "L" that had been added to the building after its completion, in order to make room for several billiard and pool tables in the rear of the main room; and this "L" had two windows in the rear wall, opening upon a yard that was almost unused, except as a har-ry place to dispose of empty barrels and boxes.

In this yard, standing upon a box in the deep shadow between an adjoining building and the spot where the light from the nearest window fell, stood a woman, in her hand a revolver.

She was gazing into the bar-room at the scene we have just pictured.

"Heaven curse him!" she muttered between her set teeth; "I am tempted to shoot him where he sits! But I might hit my child. No, no; I must not risk that! Little does he think she is his own child. Oh, she is crying! Why was I tempted to send her in there? Is there not one *man* in all that crowd—no one to rescue her from that villain's grasp? Must I—Ah!"

The man from Yellow Pine had crossed the room, and now laid his hand heavily upon the mine superintendent's shoulder.

"My friend," said the young sport, in an imperative tone, "remove your hand from this child's arm."

So sudden—so unexpected came the interruption, that Kenneth relaxed his hold of the child involuntarily, and she slipped away and ran hastily from the room.

"Thank Heaven! a friend—a friend at last!" the watching woman exclaimed, as she thrust the revolver into her pocket and sprung down from the box she was standing on. "Here is one who dares interfere to protect the weak, one who fears no man, as I can read in his stately mien and flashing eye."

And as she uttered the words half-aloud, she made her way out of the yard as quickly as possible, rejoined her child, and together they hurried away from the scene.

For one brief instant Jared Kenneth was too astounded to speak, and then he cried:

"Sir, remove your hand instantly! Do you know whom you address in this manner?"

The object gained, the hand was already removed, and as he stepped back a single step, Jean Grantley answered:

"I certainly do not address a *man*, much less a gentleman!"

Kenneth was upon his feet instantly, pale and trembling with rage.

"You doll-faced braggart!" he fairly yelled, "if you were not a mere boy I would knock you down!"

"You are very considerate, very, after ill-treating and frightening a mere child, and a girl at that. Pah! But you needn't deny yourself any pleasure on account of my youth. If you think I should be knocked down, proceed and do it—of course provided you're able to do so."

"You young whelp! I'll—"

The sentence was never finished. At the sound of the word "whelp," the young man's right arm shot out like a steam drill, and the superintendent was sent flying over tables and chairs to land upon the floor beyond.

Up sprung Willis Stanton, instantly.

"That man is my friend," he cried, "and the man who strikes him strikes me!" and he attempted to draw a revolver, but the young sport was too quick for him.

"It does you little credit to own it," he said, "and if you're wise you won't try to pull that weapon. You're out of the game, and if you take my advice you'll keep out. I'm young, but I'm old enough to look out for Number One, you bet!"

The sport was master of the situation.

Stanton evidently concluded that he was, for he desisted in his attempt to draw his revolver, sat down again, and said:

"You've got me cornered this deal," as he tried to force a smile, "but my turn will come next, and then—look out!"

"Thank you for nothing. I'm most always 'looking out,' when I am not doing anything else, my friend."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Yes, that's th' ticket for soup," cried several others, "who be ye, sport?"

Then came the words already quoted:

"Kentucky Jean, the Youthful Sport from Yellow Pine, are the name and title I lay claim to, gentlemen, and you've got it straight from headquarters."

"From Kentucky, eh?" queried Colonel Dallas.

"No, sir," the sport answered, respectfully, "I never saw Kentucky in my life. My name is one given me at Yellow Pine, owing to the fact that I always wear this one sort of cloth—Kentucky jean, and because the name fits me well—my name being Jean, in fact."

Jared Kenneth was stunned for a few moments by the blow and fall, but he now picked himself up, with many threats and curses, but it was noticed that he did not care to attack the young man from Yellow Pine.

"You'll remember *this* night, curse you!" the mine superintendent hissed, as he left the room.

Kentucky Jean smiled, and the trouble being over, sat down.

"Young man," Colonel Dallas remarked, "I've seen your face before."

"Likely enough, sir; I've traveled quite a little," was Jean's response.

"I'll tell ye who he looks like," interposed an old miner who sat near, "an' that's Rube Ritten's gal—he's jest like her as two peas."

True enough. The youthful sport, when, one came to notice it, bore a striking resemblance to Blue-eyed Belle of Bended Bow.

CHAPTER V.

ONE SECRET OUT.

FOR one brief instant after the tragic event with which our third chapter closes, Rube Ritten stood as though chilled with horror. The next instant he sprang forward to the table and blew out the light.

"Oh! I's done killed, I's done killed!" Aunt Dinah groaned, as she writhed in pain.

"Oh! daddy, what shall we do?" cried Blue-eyed Belle. "Who can have fired that cruel shot at poor Aunt Dinah?"

"Wait jest a minute, gal," said Rube, as he caught up a rifle from its place on the wall, flung open a side door and stepped out boldly, but he could see no one. He made his way around the house, but not a sign of any person could be seen. Just as he came around to the front, however, he beheld a man coming toward the house from the street.

"Whoop! hol' up there, neighbor," he cried, bringing his rifle up, "who be ye?"

"What'n thunder ails ye, Rube?" came a familiar voice. "Don't ye know me?"

"Is that you, Peleg?"

"In course it are!"

"Go an' bring a doctor here jest as quick as ye kin, then. There's been murder done in my house."

Peleg Green stood as though rooted to the spot.

"Murder done in your house?" he repeated.

"Yes—yes! Don't stop to ask a single question, but go—go like sin! I'll tell ye 'bout it when ye git back."

"But, Rube, it's not Blue-eyed—"

"No—no! it's Aunt Dinah! Now go, man, for heaven sakes go!"

Peleg started on a run, and Rube, first closing the shutters of the two windows that opened into the room, entered and relighted the lamp.

He had been absent not more than a minute at most.

"Oh! daddy," sobbed Blue-eyed Belle, as she knelt beside the old negress, "what shall we do what *can* we do? Aunt Dinah must not die."

"We can't do much till th' doctor comes," Rube answered. "Git a piller from th' bed in her room thar, an' we'll lift her up onto th' settee."

Belle obeyed quickly, and Aunt Dinah was lifted up and laid upon the broad, old-fashioned settee.

"Hit am no use, Mars' Rube, hit am no use, Blue-eyes," the old woman moaned; "old Aunt Dinah am done killed."

"Don't give up, mammy," said Rube, kindly; "wait till we hear what th' doctor has ter say 'bout it."

"Hit am no use, no use. I's goin', I kin feel I's goin', an' fore I goes I must tell de secret I has kept so long."

"What secret?" demanded Rube.

"De secret ob Blue-eyed Belle."

"A secret about me?" the girl cried, drawing still closer to the wounded woman. "Tell me, oh! tell me what it is!"

"Yes, child, yes, I'll tell ye now, an' bress de Lawd He lets me live long enough."

The old woman was badly wounded, and it pained her to talk, but, waiting only long enough to change her position a little and regain her breath, she spoke again.

"Mars' Rube," she said, "you go in my room dar an' pull out my old blue box from under de bed, an' fetch it out heah."

"What's yer old blue box got ter do with what ye've got ter say?" Rube questioned.

"Hit's got all ter do, Mars' Rube, all ter do wid hit. Don't fool no time, fer old Dinah's last breff may be comin' next any minute, an' I must tell what I knows fore I die."

Rube said no more, but stepped into a little room adjoining and brought forth the box.

"Now, Blue-eyes," said Aunt Dinah, "you take dis yere key from roun' my neck an' open dat box an' do jest what I done tell ye."

"Yes, auntie," replied Belle, "I will." And with trembling hands she removed the key, unlocked the box, and raised the lid. And then an exclamation of surprise escaped her. In one end of the box—or little chest, for such it was—was a little compartment as long as the width of the chest, and several inches wide and deep; and that compartment was nearly full of money—bright, yellow gold.

"Heavens!" cried Rube, as he stooped and looked closer, "here is a fortune!"

The pieces were mostly twenties and tens, with here and there a five in sight.

"Yes," declared the old negress, "hit am a fortune. Dere am more'n four thousan' dollars dar, an' hit all belongs to Blue-eyed Belle—eberry piece."

"Belongs to me!" and the girl looked the surprise she felt.

"Yes, honey, hit am all yourn."

"Oh! auntie, I cannot take it! It must be the savings of your whole lifetime."

"No, no, child, hit am not mine—neber was mine; hit am all yourn."

"Explain what you mean, old woman, explain," urged Rube, in a fever of excitement, almost.

"Yes, Mars' Rube, an' I must hurry, too. You see dem two loops at de end ob de money-box, Missy Belle?"

"Yes, Aunt Dinah, I see them."

"Well, run your fingers into 'em an' lift de money-box out."

The girl obeyed.

"What you see now?" the old woman asked.

"Nothing, except the empty box into which this box fits."

"Dat am so. Now put dat money-box on de table, an' den feel under de 'partment whar it fits an' you'll done feel a string."

"Yes, here it is," Belle announced, as she obeyed the directions and found the string as indicated.

"Well, now, jes' pull dat string—an' look in de 'partment as you do so."

The string was pulled and the bottom of the compartment parted in the middle and the two sides lifted up, revealing underneath a secret receptacle in which lay a small paper neatly folded.

"Take out de paper," Aunt Dinah directed, "put de money-box in ag'in an' shut down de lid, den I'll done tell ye all I knows."

These directions were quickly carried out, and then, as soon as the old negress had rested a little, she began:

"Eighteen years ago dis summer, Missy Blue-eyes, Mars' Rube found you like he jes' done told ye, an' him an' Peleg Green done fotch ye to old Aunt Dinah. I took ye, an' from the fu'st minute I done sot eyes on ye I lub ye—lub ye so much dat I wouldn't parted wi' ye fer de whole worl'."

"Well, after Mars' Rube an' Peleg dey stay a little while, dey goes away, an' den I gets ready to undress ye an' dry your clothes, fer you was wet fru an' fru wi' de rain; an' I had jes' done commenced when dere comes a knock at de door."

"Come in," I say, an' in comes a man wi' a big black mask all ober his face.

"What yo' wants?" I ask him, kinder skart-like.

"Whar am dat baby?" he done ask me.

"Here she am," I say.

"What yo' gwine to do wi' it?" he say.

"Keep it," I say; "keep it fer Red-top Rube."

"Am Rube gwine ter pay ye?" he done said then.

"Yes, hin course he am," I say, sort o' snap-like. "What yo' done want roun' heah, anyhow?"

"I done want ter make a bargain wi' ye," he say.

"Yo' want make er bargain wi' me?" I say after him.

"Yes, dat's what I wants," he say.

"Well," I say, "what am de bargain?"

Rube began to believe the wound was less dangerous than he had at first supposed, from the way Aunt Dinah rattled on. He was all attention to what she was saying, too, for this was news to him, and he was anxious to learn who the mysterious visitor had been.

"Well," the old woman went right on, "I'll tell ye, de man say. 'I done want you to take care ob dat baby long as it lives, an' I'll done pay ye fer it. Here am twenty dollars,' he say, 'an' I'll give ye twenty dollars ebbery month, reg'lar.'"

"Who was that man?" Rube asked, too impatient to wait for Aunt Dinah to come to that.

"Bress yo', Mars' Rube," she answered, "I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"No. He had dat mask all ober his face, an' he talked gruff-like, an' I's neber seen him sence."

"How, then, did he pay ye th' money ebbery month?"

"Sometimes one way, sometimes 'nother; an' neber de same way de next time. I was sure ter git it, though, as I found, an' I didn't puzzle my head 'bout *how* it kem, so long as it *did* come. Sometimes it would come in a letter; sometimes it would be shoved under the door at night; sometimes it would be frowed into de winder—Oh! it kem in ebbery way ye kin fink ob."

"Well," I say to the man, "I take de bargain. I mean ter care for de child anyhow, but dat money won't come in any amiss, I don't reckon. I takes de bargain." An' I took de twenty dollars.

"Now," de man he done say, 'look heah; you's ter keep dis a secret, old woman, an' ye mustn't try ter find out who I be, d'ye mind?"

"Yes," I say, "I mind. I'll keep de secret, an' I won't try ter find out who you is, 'cause I don't keer, anyhow; an' now if dat's all you's got ter say, you better git, cause dis child will done cotch her deff o' dampness, shua." An' he got."

The more Aunt Dinah talked, the less concern Rube felt in regard to the wound she had received. She talked with too much volubility and strength to be in any danger of dying, he thought. Still, he was none the less anxious to have Peleg return with the doctor.

"And you didn't find out who that man was?" he inquired.

"No, Mars' Rube, I neber find out."

"An' ye never see him ag'in, ye say?"

"Neber. He comed an' he went, an' dat was de last ob him."

"But he sent th' money reg'lar, eh?"

"Jes' as reg'lar as de sun. An' dat's de money dere in de box. I don't reckon I's spent more in two or free hundred dollars ob it in de hull eighteen years, an' de most ob dat hab been for nice fixin's for Missy Belle when she went to school, to make her look as 'spectable as any gal in town; an' some one time when you was sick. De rest ob it am all dar—ober four thousan' dollars."

"And when d'ye expect that twenty dollars ter come ag'in?" Rube asked. "I think I'll try my hand at unwindin' this heur mystery, now that I've got holt onto th' end of it. Why didn't ye tell me these things long ago?"

"Golly, Mars' Rube, I couldn't!"

"Ye couldn't!"

"No, I couldn't. I tried ter do hit—many an' many a time I's tried ter do hit, but I couldn't. I lubed little Blue-eyes so much, an' I was 'fraid if I told what I knowed you'd find out who she belongs to, an' I'd lose her. Oh! I *couldn't* tell ye, Mars' Rube, 'deed I couldn't."

Blue-eyed Belle, meanwhile, was standing by the table, reading over and over again the paper she had taken from the chest, scarcely hearing the conversation. What that paper was the ensuing chapter must reveal.

"But," repeating his question, "when d'ye expect ter git that money ag'in?" Rube asked.

"Why," answered Dinah, "it cster be here dis week, shua. I looked fer hit yesterday, an' all day ter-day, an'—"

At that instant there came a crash—or more accurately a thud—against the front door, and something fell heavily upon the step without.

Instantly Rube caught up his rifle again and sprang out the side door, but not a person could

be seen. He stepped to the fence nearest him, and made his way along till his position commanded a full view of the front of the house, but no one was there. Then he advanced to the front door.

There on the step lay the stone which had been hurled against the door to draw attention, and on the sill, with its edge just sticking under the door, lay a white envelope.

Rube understood it all in a moment. It was the money for Aunt Dinah. And so it proved.

Whoever had left it must have crept up to the door silently, deposited the envelope, and then retiring to a safe distance, hurled the stone at the door and then hurried off.

"It's somebody that knows my habits mighty well, an' expected I was out," Rube decided, as he returned into the house, "fer this is th' first night I've been home at this hour of th' evenin' in a long while."

CHAPTER VI.

AND STILL ANOTHER.

THE sudden blow against the door had recalled Blue-eyed Belle from her reverie, and dropping the paper upon the table she turned quickly toward the old negress, fearing further danger, and as Rube dashed out into the darkness, said:

"Do not be alarmed, Aunt Dinah; no more harm shall come to you."

"No, no, child, dey can't do old Dinah any more harm dan dey has, dat am shua. But, child, dat shot wasn't 'tended fer me."

"Whom, then?" and the question came in startled tones.

"Hit was 'tended fer you."

"For me?"

"Yes, honey, it was 'tended fer you, an' fer nobody else."

"But how do you know it was? Who fired it?"

"Who fired it, I dunno; but I's shua you was de one aimed at. Don't you see how it was? Mars' Rube was out ob de range 'tirely; I was on de oder side ob you, an' ahind de table; but you—you was right in plain sight. Nobody would thought o' shootin' old Dinah, an' if dey had, dey'd not shot when you was right in front ob me; but if dey'd wanted ter shoot you, Missy Belle, den was deir chance. But, bress de Lawd! dey missed you, an' old Dinah am happy ter die."

"Oh! do not speak of dying, auntie! You must not—*shall* not die!"

"I's 'fraid Aunt Dinah am called, Missy Belle, I'se 'fraid she am."

"Oh! why does the doctor not come? I—"

A step was heard at the door, but it was Rube, and a moment later he entered the way he had gone out.

"What was de noise?" the old negress asked.

"That's what it was," Rube answered, as he threw the sealed envelope upon the table.

"That was stuck under th' door, an' then a stone was throwed at th' door so's we'd open it an' find it."

"Yes, yes, hit am de money," the old woman muttered, "hit am de money. Dat am de way he done left it one time before, only dat time I was all alone. De man must thought I was alone dis time, too, I reckon."

"Shall I open it?" Rube asked.

"Yes," Aunt Dinah assented, "open it."

Rube did so, and took from the envelope a twenty-dollar gold piece, which was wrapped in a piece of blank paper. There was not a word of writing.

"An' this money has been a-comin' since th' night I first found Blue-eyed Belle, has it?" the old miner asked, as he held the coin in his hand and gazed at it.

"Yes, Mars' Rube."

"An' you never told me."

"Oh! I couldn't, I couldn't tell ye."

"Who can it be that sends it?" Belle interposed.

"Whoever it is," Rube declared, "it is one who knows th' secret of your life, little Blue-eyes."

"Oh! do you think so?"

"I am sartain of it. Th' fact speaks fer it-self. In course, though, th' one that left this money heur to-night may not be th' man that made th' bargain with Aunt Dinah. He may be hundreds o' miles away, an' have an agent ter 'tend to it."

"Yes, that is so. Still, I am bound to find him, and force the secret from him. And you will help me, won't you, daddy?"

"Yes, little gal, that I will. Now that there's an outcrop o' th' mystery found, we'll go on till we strike th' true vein."

"And, daddy, if it's necessary we'll use this very money to get at the truth."

"Yes, if money is needed."

"But, Aunt Dinah," the girl suddenly cried, as she thought again of the mysterious paper, "you have not told us where *this* came from," picking the paper up as she spoke.

"Sure 'nuff, child, so I hasn't. But den I hain't finished tellin' my story."

"Go ahead, then," Rube urged, "an' let's hear all you've got ter tell."

"Well, when dat man be done gone away,

den I go ahead to ondress de baby, an' while I's doin' so I finds dat paper."

"You found this paper on me?" Blue-eyed Belle cried.

"Yes, I found dat paper on you. It was pinned fast under your bands, so as it couldn't git lost if it wanted to. I done took it off careful like, so's not to tear it, an' den when it was dry I put it away. You see I couldn't read it myself, an' I didn't want anybody else ter see it, so I put it out o' sight."

"And it has lain there in the bottom of that box all these years?"

"Yes, child, I never took it out ag'in. I was 'fraid, because I's'posed mebbe it would show who you am, an' I'd lose ye. You will forgive me, Missy Belle?"

"Yes, Aunt Dinah, I forgive you. You have been so kind and good to me."

"Deed I's tried to, anyhow."

"But, you meant to tell me sometime, I suppose?"

"Yes, I meant to tell ye sometime, but I couldn't make up my mind when it would be. Dis may be de punishment ob de good Lawd sent 'pon poor old Dine."

"But, th' paper," Rube interrupted, "what is it, gal?"

"Why, daddy, it is a marriage-certificate."

"Ther doost ye say! Read it, gal, read it out."

Rube could read but poorly at best, so Blue-eyed Belle unfolded the paper and read aloud:

"CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE.

"This certifies that Delwin Mourtou and Sibyl Gernett, both of Denver, Col., were by me joined together in Holy Matrimony, at Denver, Territory of Colorado, on the tenth day of May, in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Sixty-three.

MICAH MAHLON. (REV.)

JAMES GERNETT, { Witnesses.

MARY A. GRAY, {

Steps were heard approaching as Belle finished reading, and in a moment more Peleg Green entered without ceremony, closely followed by a doctor whom he had had no little difficulty in finding.

"How is she?" Peleg instantly asked.

"No worse," Rube responded.

"Is this the injured woman?" the doctor queried, turning toward Aunt Dinah at once.

"Yes," Rube affirmed.

"What is the nature of the wound? a knife wound?"

"No, she's been shot."

Peleg having been dispatched in such haste, had not known anything beyond the fact that "murder had been done," as Rube had expressed it, and that Aunt Dinah was the victim.

Rube now gave Peleg a sign, and the two retired from the room while the doctor, with the assistance of Blue-eyed Belle, examined and dressed the wound.

Aunt Dinah was found to be badly, but not dangerously injured, the bullet having touched no vital spot, and the doctor predicted that if her age could withstand the shock and loss of blood, she would soon be all right again.

"Better let me die," she complained. "I's done told eberything I knows, an' now dere am no more happiness for poor old Dine. Better let me die."

"No, no, auntie," the girl cried, "you must not die! All will be the same as before. No matter what comes, I shall not leave you!"

"Bress you, my child, bress you!"

"You will pardon my curiosity if I inquire how this accident occurred?" the doctor observed, when Rube and Peleg returned to the room.

"It war no accident," Rube answered; "it war an attempt at murder. D'ye see that 'ar hole?" pointing to the broken glass in the window.

"Yes."

"Wal, th' bullet made that hole. Ye see th' shutters wur open, an' th' shot wur fired from th' front yard thar, or from th' street."

"This is wonderful! Who do you imagine can have fired it?"

"I don't know, doctor, haven't th' least idee; but I *will* know, an' then you bet thar'll be a settlement. I didn't know th' old woman had an enemy in th' world."

"Nor more she has, Mars' Rube," old Dinah quickly interposed, "no more she has! Dat 'ar shot war'n't fired at me." And she went on and advanced the same theory we have seen her explain to Blue-eyed Belle.

"By heavens! th' old woman is right!" Rube exclaimed. "Thar's mischief afoot in this heur burg."

"Ye're right," Peleg agreed.

"And you, my dear young lady," said the doctor, "must be careful not to expose yourself to danger, now that you are warned."

"It is hard to believe the bullet was intended for me," Belle declared, "but I shall be very careful, as you advise. If I have an enemy, I cannot imagine who it can be."

"No; and as you say, it is hard to believe the bullet was intended for you. But, the fact remains that you were nearest the window."

"Right," mused Rube. "right. Th' shot wur fired at little Blue-eyes, an' nobody else!"

The doctor soon went away, and then Rube bade Belle and Peleg sit down, and said:

"Now we're friends, us four is, friends as kin trust one another, an' what I say I say to all. I've got an idee whar that cowardly shot kem from."

"You have!" from Belle and Peleg together.

"Yes, I have. It is plain that it was th' work of either a cowardly cur or a madman, ain't it?"

"Yes," agreed Peleg, "that are plain."

"Wal, it wasn't a madman."

"Then it must have been th' other."

"It was."

"Oh! daddy, whom do you suspect?" cried Belle. "Who can want to do me such harm?"

"I'll tell ye, baby Blue-eyes, but first I want ter ask ye a question; an' what I say heur is to go no further, mind ye."

"Certain, Rube," Peleg hastened to assure, feeling that this was intended for him, as it was; "certain."

Turning to Belle, then, Rube continued:

"You remember what we was a-talkin' of when that shot was fired, of course."

Belle's warm blood mounted to her cheeks, and she answered softly:

"Yes, daddy."

"Wal, I asked ye a question."

"Yes, I remember. My answer is—No."

"That don't answer th' hull question," Rube declared, "an' I must git at it right. Ye needn't mind old Peleg heur, fer he's as true as gold. Now you said ye'd this day promised ter marry an honest man o' this town, didn't ye?"

Belle dropped her eyes a little more, but her reply was distinctly spoken.

"Yes, daddy."

"An' now ye say that man is not th' one I mentioned—Jared Kenneth?"

"Yes, daddy, so I say. It is not Jared Kenneth. You ought to know it could not be he."

"So I do know it, now. I didn't really think it could be, but I wanted ter hear it straight from yer own lips, fer he has been askin' me ag'in fer leave ter marry ye."

"He has—Jared Kenneth?"

"Yes; an' what's more, he's as good as sworn ye *shall* be his."

"Never!" and the girl's eyes flashed as the word shot from her pretty lips.

"So I thought, but I wanted ter hear ye say so. You said a 'honest' man, an' though I don't s'pose I could prove anything dishonest o' Jared, he don't fill th' bill to my likin' in that partic'lar. Now, who is th' favored one?"

"It is Charles Denson."

"Oh ho! Charlie Denson, hey? So *that's* th' way th' wind blows, is it? Wal, little Blue-eyes, I don't know as ye could 'a' done any better."

"And you're not angry with me, daddy?"

"No, child, no. I knowed it would come to this sooner er later, an' I hain't no fault ter find."

"Thank you, daddy, and bless you. But I shall not leave you, daddy, for I cannot marry until this awful mystery is cleared away. Oh! I was so happy before you told me, and— But, daddy, we *will* solve the mystery, won't we? If I thought we couldn't, I would almost wish that cruel bullet had pierced my heart."

"Solve it! in course we will! An' that brings me back to whar we started. I am sart'in now I know who it was that fired at ye."

"And who was it? Whom do you suspect?"

"It was Jared Kenneth. Findin' he could not win ye, an' learnin' that ye have pledged yer hand to Charlie Denson, he has tried ter kill ye. Blue-eyed Belle, ye must beware o' Jared Kenneth!"

The advice was good, and Rube's logic was sound enough; but for once the old man was mistaken. That shot had been fired by a woman's hand.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE BOW" AND "THE ARROW."

IF proof were wanting that Bended Bow had made such progress as we claim for it in the eighteen years that had passed since the eventful night of our first description, we could show it in the fact that the town now supported two daily newspapers.

One of these newspapers was "The Bow," owned, edited and published by one Major Theobald Miles.

The other was "The Arrow," the owner, editor and proprietor of which was one General Orrion Wade.

These two gentlemen were business rivals and bitter enemies, each striving to make his own paper the best, and at the same time doing all he could to injure the other's.

The motto of Major Miles's paper was: "It is the catapult that hurls the bolt—the bow that flings the arrow;" while that of its rival was: "It is the bolt that does the business—the arrow that wings the game."

In the way of mottoes they were pretty evenly matched. But the case did not rest there. Each issue of their papers was full to overflowing of a wordy warfare, in which each banded the other mercilessly and "without gloves." Threats, most horrible and dire were hurled at each other in cold type through the medium of the press;

libelous appellations were freely set forth in glaring italics and bold-faced caps; challenges innumerable had been publicly proclaimed, only to be ridiculed and declined, or waved aside with scorn.

Nor were these two great spirits rivals in business alone; they were likewise rivals in love. They had both been smitten with the tender passion about the same time, and the object of their love was a fair young widow of thirty-nine, one Euphemia Wiggins, who owned a house and lot, and a goodly number of paying mining shares left her by the late lamented—her husband.

As soon as this new rivalry had sprung up between them, it was noticed that they pitched into each other with renewed vigor, and it was believed that, sooner or later, there would be a rush to arms, and one of the powers would perish.

Of course the public took a lively interest in this war of words, and the circulation of the papers was something immense, for that comparatively small "city." Almost every person in town who could read at all read both sheets, enjoying the rare and spicy entertainment to the full, and from a business standpoint the two publishers could not have had a better "card."

The office of "The Bow" was just across the street from the office of "The Arrow," and the two editors could sit and glare at each other to their hearts' content.

On the morning following the evening of which we have been speaking, Major Miles and General Wade happened to be coming from breakfast about the same time.

They slept in their offices, but took their meals outside, one at the Everybody's Home and the other at a restaurant a little nearer by.

It was Major Miles who patronized the hotel, and just as he was passing the restaurant mentioned, though upon the opposite side of the street, General Wade came out.

"Good-morning, you whining cur!" cried the major.

"Ah! is that you, you braying jackass?" responded the general, and then the two shook their fists at each other most cordially and walked on toward their respective sanctums.

Presently the major exclaimed:

"Oh! but I'll write you up beautifully this time, my esteemed contemporary! When 'The Bow' comes out this afternoon you'll hang your head in shame!"

"Will I?" retorted the general; "you just wait and see! If my paper don't give you a happy send-off to-day, then I'm a liar!"

"Ba-a-h!" cried the major, shaking his fist again.

"Ba-a-h!" yelled the general, shaking his.

They walked on in silence then to the doors of their establishments, where they paused a moment to exchange a parting salute.

"Miles," shouted the general, "you're an ass! You're a know-nothing ass, sir!"

"And you, sir," returned the major, "are a puppy! Do you hear me? I say you're a puppy, a puppy, sir! You're a dirty 'yaller' puppy!"

"You're a coward!" screamed the general, "and I dare you to come over here!"

"You're another!" bellowed the major, "and I dare you to come over here!"

"I wouldn't cross the street to wipe my feet upon you, sir!"

"I wish you would!"

"Why don't you come over here?"

"I wouldn't soil my boots for the satisfaction, sir!"

"Ba-a-h!"

"Ba-a-h!"

With a parting shake of their fists, then, both wheeled and disappeared, and the spectators laughed till their sides ached.

A moment later the rivals appeared at the windows of their editorial rooms, and with one more pleasant salutation with the fist, sat down to the work of the day.

About an hour later the "youthful sport," Kentucky Jean, strolled down the street, looking at the signs as he passed along, and when he came to the office of "The Bow," stopped, took a look at the exterior, and entered.

He soon found his way to the editor's den, and entered and sat down.

"You're the editor, I suppose," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," responded the major, "I'm the editor." And as he spoke he dropped his arm carelessly across the table so that his hand came in proximity to a revolver lying there, adding: "Did you want to see me?"

The sport smiled.

"Yes," he answered, "but I'm not on the war-path, my dear sir, so pray have no uneasiness."

"Not the slightest, my dear fellow," the major assured grimly, "not the slightest. What is your pleasure?"

"I understand you have been established here for some years."

"You have been correctly informed, sir. *The Bow* is entering upon its sixth year."

"Older, I presume, than *The Arrow*."

"That scurrilous sheet, sir! That repository of malignant slander and virulent abuse! Allow me to assure you, sir, that *The Bow* is older than *The Arrow* by two weeks."

"Quite a distinction. But, to state my business: No doubt, sir, you have a large circle of acquaintances in this part of the State, and if I can get the information I want anywhere, I am most likely to get it from you."

"Thank you," the major acknowledged with a bow. "Yes, I know a great many people here," he returned, "and any information I can give you, sir, will be given cheerfully. Of whom are you in search?"

"I desire to find one Delwin Mourton, who came—or is supposed to have come—to this part of the country, from Denver, about nineteen years ago."

Major Miles was silent for a moment, thinking, and then said:

"I never heard of him, sir. The name is entirely new to me."

"As I feared it would be. But, sir, I am sure if any information is to be had, a small advertisement in your paper—"

"Ah! you are right! I meant to suggest it to you. I honestly believe, sir, that an ad. in *The Bow* would bring a response from the man in the moon."

"Say no more, sir. I will advertise. May I take your pencil and paper for a moment?"

"Certainly, sir."

Kentucky Jean drew his chair up to a corner of the editor's table, and in a few minutes had written what he desired to have inserted.

"There," he inquired, as he pushed the pad of paper over to the major, "what will the tax be?"

Miles read the article, and asked:

"How long do you want it to stand?"

"Your paper is a daily?"

"Yes."

"Well, say one week."

The cost was soon named and paid, and the sport rose to go.

"I think," he remarked, "I'll step over to the other office and leave the same there. If one advertisement is good, two ought to be better, surely."

"Ought to be, yes; but in *that* sheet—" and a motion of disgust completed the sentence.

The young man laughed, and bidding the editor of *The Bow* good-morning, stepped out and across the street to the office of *The Arrow*.

General Wade saluted him the moment he entered.

"You've just come out of that jackal's den across the way, I noticed," he said. "I suppose the groveling wretch who styles himself the editor has tried to swindle you, and you've come here where you're sure of square dealing and small cost. Am I right?"

"Well, hardly," the sport answered, as he helped himself to a chair. "Fact is, my dear sir, I've left a little advertisement in the hands of your rival, and I want to insert the same in your paper."

"You don't mean to tell me you have left an ad. in the hands of that shark, to appear in the reeking columns of that sewer of refuse—*The Bow*, do you?"

"Such is the case, sir."

"I am astounded. But, surely, you are a stranger, or you would know the stained reputation that paper bears."

"I find that there is a bitter rivalry between the two papers. *The Bow* speaks about as strongly against *The Arrow*."

"What! Has that dog-faced baboon over there dared to speak ill of my paper?" and the general shook his fist at the major (who instantly responded in like manner, and with equal vim); "I'll horsewhip the cur the first time I meet him. Oh! you rascal! won't I show you up, though! Pardon me, my dear sir," turning to the sport, "but I cannot control myself."

"That's all right, sir; and now if you are ready I'll state my business more fully."

"Certainly, sir, I— Oh! you old villain!—I beg your pardon. Now I am all attention."

The business in hand was the same as we have seen transacted at the office of *The Bow*, and it was soon done and the sport took his departure.

That afternoon when the two papers came out there were accounts in full of the mysterious shooting of Aunt Dinah, the old negress who kept house for Rube Rittens; and also of the shot that had been fired into the office of the Break o' Day Mine. And a mystery it was, for no one could imagine who the would-be assassin could be.

Even Rube Rittens, when he learned of the first shooting, had a doubt as to whether it could have been Jared Kenneth who fired the bullet that came so near being fatal to his old housekeeper.

In the way of editorial exchanges of compliments, too, both papers were as entertaining as ever.

In *The Bow* was a lengthy article, of which the following is the substance:

"Much to our surprise, that weak-kneed apology for a newspaper—*The Arrow*—still flourishes, and its editor is still out of jail. We met the cur this morning, and dared him to cross the street. Needless to say he did not accept, but slunk into his miserable den. Ha! he came within reach, we would have annihilated him on the spot. We would have crossed the street to him, but he is too

far beneath our notice. How much longer can the suffering public bear with him? If there ever lived a miserable sneak; if the world holds a cowardly cur; if there is a villain unhung; if there is a driveling idiot wanting to be incarcerated; if there is a pestilence abroad in the land;—*that miserable being GENERAL ORRION WADE—is the creature.*"

And in *The Arrow*, to counterbalance the matter, was an article of which the following will give some idea:

"As we were coming from breakfast this morning, that whimpering doit—the self-styled 'editor of *The Bow*, a contumelious sheet of so little worth we wonder at its existence—hailed us from across the street, and we immediately shook our fist at the braying ass and dared him to come over and let us knock him down. He in turn dared us to cross, as we would have done promptly but for the fact that we knew he would run if we did, and disappoint us. *The Bow* is a disgrace to the city, and its 'editor' is worse. If there is a grinning chimpanzee out of Africa; if there is a gorilla loose in this State; if there is a crawling snake around; if there is a skunk in the neighborhood; if there is a nondescript creature in this city possessing the essential characteristics of all the animals named;—*that creature is MAJOR THEOBALD MILES.*"

There was, however, one article—a modest advertisement—that was the same in both papers. It read as follows:

"WANTED—To find one Delwin Mourton, who left Denver, Col., about the year 1864. Any person giving information concerning him or his present whereabouts, will be liberally rewarded."

"Call on or address—"

"DOBSON & BLAKE,
Attorneys at Law,
Denver, Col."

"Delwin Mourton!" that was one of the names upon the marriage-certificate found by—or rather delivered to—Blue-eyed Belle on the previous night!

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE BEGINNING.

ON one of the leading thoroughfares of Denver stands a substantial building, in which are many offices occupied by lawyers, real-estate agents, etc., whose signs adorn the main entrance.

One of these signs reads "Dobson & Blake, Attorneys at Law."

In the year of 1883, about a week previously to the time of the events just recorded, an old man passed into this building one day, slowly ascended the stairs, and entered the office of Dobson & Blake.

He was an old man, as stated, with hair and beard as white as snow, but his clear eyes and steady hands proved him to be full of mental vigor and bodily health.

Both Dobson and Blake happened to be in, and both looked up as the door opened.

"Mr. Dobson? or Mr. Blake?" the old man inquired.

"Both, sir," answered Dobson, as he rose and extended a chair.

"And you?" as the old man sat down.

"I am Dobson, sir. This gentleman is my partner, Mr. Blake."

"Thank you, sir. I always like to know to whom I am speaking."

"A very good plan. Can we be of any service to you, sir?"

"You can." And as he answered the old man drew from his pocket a newspaper—a London *Times*, opened it, pointed to a small advertisement, and asked:

"Was this inquiry made by you?"

Dobson glanced at it and promptly replied:

"It was."

The advertisement was this:

"GERNETT.—The heirs of James Gernett, who died at Denver, Col. (U. S.), in 1864, will learn of something to their interest by addressing us."

"DOBSON & BLAKE,
Attorneys at Law,
Denver, Col., U. S. A."

"Very good," the old gentleman pursued. "I like to know that I am right before I go ahead. I, gentlemen, am Gardner Gernett, a brother to James Gernett, and his only relative, barring descendants—if any are living."

"My dear sir," cried Dobson, "I am happy to see you, and overjoyed to know you are so near a relative. Prove your identity to us, sir, and we will make you a millionaire."

"You surely do not mean it," the old gentleman commented.

"I do mean it, most assuredly. Show us proof that you are the person you claim to be, sir, and I will put you in possession of all the facts."

"Fortunately I have the proofs with me. In fact, I fully prepared myself for every foreseen contingency before starting from England. Here are copies of various documents, sir, all duly attested, which will relieve your mind of every doubt. Please to examine them."

As he spoke the old gentleman drew from an inner pocket a long, black pocketbook, and handed it to the lawyer.

Dobson opened it and examined the papers carefully, found them satisfactory, and said:

"These are more than sufficient for the purpose, sir, and I admire your business tact as shown by your forethought in preparing so thoroughly. Now I will state the facts."

"Some time about the year Eighteen-Fifty, as

we have learned, James Gernett came to this country from England. From that time to the year of 'Sixty-two we lose all trace of him. In 'Sixty-two we find him here at Denver, owner of a gold mine, and evidently on the high road to fortune. He had one child, a daughter. In 'Sixty-three his mine failed, and in 'Sixty-four he died. Previous to his death his daughter had married, but whom we cannot learn.

"We have advertised for the heirs in this country, but none were forthcoming, and as a last effort we advertised in England."

"But what is your interest in the matter?" the old gentleman interrupted.

"Purely a selfish one," the lawyer readily acknowledged. "I will explain. Some years ago a party of capitalists 'jumped' James Gernett's claim—a vein from a mine of their own happening to run in that direction—opened the mine anew, and in a few months it proved to be one of the best in these parts. No one knew but that the claim was theirs by right until a few months ago, when the facts became known to us.

"Here," we reasoned, 'is a chance for us to turn a penny. This mine, by right, belongs to the heirs of James Gernett. If we can find those heirs, prove their identity, and get them to enter suit for the recovery of the property, we will come in for a liberal slice when the pie is cut.'

"Add, then, to our inborn cupidity the fact that we owe these same capitalists a grudge, and you will understand our interest precisely."

"If you had appeared one week later, sir, we could have done nothing for you, since undisturbed possession for the length of time these men have held the mine would then have made it undisputably and irrevocably theirs; but give us power to move in the matter now, and the mine is yours. No power can keep it from you, with the papers you hold."

"What do you say?"

Mr. Gernett was silent for some moments, and then he said:

"Your candor, sir, gives me confidence in you. I like a man to be candid with me. If you had given me a cock-and-bull story about being interested solely for the benefit of the unknown heirs, anxious to do a deed of charity, as it were, I would have nothing whatever to do with you. Since you put your own interest first, however, and come out point-blank, I shall put the case in your hands and bring suit."

"And, by Heaven, you'll win!" exclaimed the heretofore silent Blake, bringing his fist down upon the table with a bang.

"Yes, sir," affirmed Dobson; "your success is assured."

"And if I win, gentlemen, what will be your expected share of the profits?"

The lawyers named the sum—large enough, you may be sure—and the old gentleman said:

"Very well, I agree to it. If you win the case for me, that value in the mine shall be yours. If you lose the case, then you must bear all costs. We will have that drawn up in form and duly witnessed. Do you agree to this?"

The two lawyers glanced at each other. This was no man to trifle with.

"Yes," Dobson answered, "we agree to that. We are sure of our case, and are willing to risk it. You may be sure that we calculated every point before we put the iron in the fire at all."

"As you naturally would, sir."

"You are ready, then, to begin the attack at once?"

"Yes," gentlemen, at once. First, however, let me warn you that you will have to resort to a little sharp practice in the game."

"Ah!" and both men were all eyes and ears in an instant.

"Yes," the old gentleman went on, "for I am in possession of certain facts which you are not. How would the case stand if the daughter were to appear?"

"She, of course, would be the heir."

"Exactly. And supposing her to be dead, what if a child of hers should come to the fore?"

"The result would be the same to you."

"Provided they could prove their identity."

"Certainly."

"Well, it is pretty certain that such heirs are living—perhaps not certain, but at any rate highly probable, and are likely to appear. Now, I understand you to say the suit must be begun at once, or the claim will be outlawed, and such being the case, do you want to begin it in my name now, or make a search for other and more rightful heirs upon a clew I can furnish? You see, since it is probable there are other heirs, it will be sharp practice for us to go into the case without an effort to find them."

"You call that sharp practice?" cried Dobson. "If you do, it is your affair and not ours. We have advertised for the heirs of one James Gernett. You appear and prove yourself his brother. We bring suit in your name and win the case. You pocket your tens of thousands, and we pocket our fees. If there are any other heirs, you've got the best of them by a large majority. Your affair is not ours, after the case is settled."

"Just so. And after I am in possession, if

another heir turns up with a better claim than mine, you'll bring suit for him against me."

"Business is business, as we Americans say, sir, and the chances are that we would."

"By heavens! but I admire your frankness, Dobson, I do indeed!" the old gentleman exclaimed. "We'll go into the case neck and heels, and to win. And now let me give you my story."

"James Gernett came to this country in the year you named. He and I had a bitter quarrel after the death of our father, and James left England never to return. I have lately learned that I was in the wrong in that quarrel, and was on the point of coming to the United States to find my brother and ask his forgiveness, when this advertisement of yours was shown me by a friend, and for the first time I learned that my brother was dead."

"I had heard from James only once after he left England, and that letter was dated at Denver, on May the tenth, Eighteen Sixty-three. In it he apprised me of the death of his wife some years before, and informed me of his recent good fortune in discovering a rich mine. He also informed me of the marriage of his daughter on that day, giving the name of the man she had married. Furthermore, he added that, now he was my equal in wealth, he hoped we could be friends, since money affairs had made us enemies, and asked me to write to him."

"I did not write. I felt that he was the one at fault, and resolved never to speak or write to him until he tendered an apology. Poor James! to think he died so soon after!"

"So matters stood, gentlemen, when I learned that I had been the one in the wrong in our quarrel, and when I saw your advertisement and learned that James was dead, I resolved to come in person and see you—not to profit by my poor brother's labor, but to search for his daughter, or her children, and make reparation to them for the wrong I had done my brother."

"Do you follow me?"

"We do, sir; go on."

"Well, the sum and substance of the case is this: I want you to bring suit in my name for the recovery of this mine. This is absolutely necessary, since you assure me that the action must be begun now or never. In the mean time we must search for the true heirs, and if they are found I shall surrender in their favor. If none are found, then I shall devote the wealth to some charitable purpose. If you decline to assist me in this, I must work it out alone."

"Mr. Gernett, you are one in a thousand," declared Blake. "We will assist you—or at least I am willing to do so."

"And so am I," Dobson avowed. "But, Mr. Gernett," he added, "you do not know that there are other heirs."

"True, I do not. All I know is that James Gernett's daughter, Sibyl Gernett, was married in this city on the tenth of May, Eighteen Sixty-three, to one Delwin Mourton."

"Ah! that is something, at any rate. We may be able to learn something of him, and thus find the daughter of James Gernett, or her children. But, sir, you will require the services of an able detective."

"I supposed I should. Can you direct me to one?"

"I can. There is an agency in this city employing some very able detectives, and if you desire I will send to them for a man and have him come here, where we can discuss the matter at length."

"Very well, do so. And meanwhile we can begin our arrangements for the battle."

This suggestion was acted upon, and in a few minutes the machinery of the law was set in motion in the case of "Gernett vs. The Imperial Mining Co."

The chief of the detective agency called in answer to the lawyers' summons, and after learning the particulars of the case, said he would attend to it properly and report.

A few days later his first report was received. The man who had the case in hand had learned that Delwin Mourton had deserted his wife within a year after their marriage, and that the wife had gone away from Denver shortly after the death of her father. All trace of the wife was lost from that time. The husband, however, was known to have been seen at the city of Bended Bow—then little more than a camp—in the same year, but there all trace of him was lost. It was believed, but not as yet known to a certainty, that a child had been born to the pair. The investigation would be continued.

And so the case rested.

Suit was begun at once against the Imperial Mining Co., by Mr. Gardner Gernett, through Dobson & Blake, and the detectives were instructed to put forth every effort to find the missing heirs, if there were any to find.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO MAIDENS FAIR.

THE Break o' Day Mine at Bended Bow had formerly belonged to one Philip Denson, by whom Colonel Damon Dallas had been employed in the capacity of superintendent. Denson died, and a year or so later Colonel Dallas stepped into possession by marrying Mrs. Denson, the

widow, and the mine soon became his, as Denson had willed the property to his wife unservedly, and she was weak enough to make it over to her second husband.

Mrs. Denson had two children, a boy and a girl. Charles, the eldest, was now a noble, manly fellow of twenty-two, while his sister, Minnie, was a handsome brunette of eighteen.

Mrs. Denson's second union was fruitless.

People had marveled much that such a man as Philip Denson should leave such a will—a will that virtually left his children beggars; but then, he had fairly idolized his wife, and it was thought that he desired to express and manifest his entire confidence in her by leaving it to her to provide for them; a noble sentiment, certainly, but a most unwise act. If the will had been a surprise, though, what can be said of the astonishment when it became known that the widow had signed everything over to her second husband—Colonel Dallas?

So many years had passed, however, that these events were now almost forgotten, and the children themselves—Charles and Minnie—knew little or nothing of the wrong that had been done them by their parents—by the father indirectly and by the mother directly.

In fact, Charles and Minnie knew but little concerning their father anyway. They had long since learned that their mother was rather inclined to reticence in regard to his memory, and for years his name had scarcely been mentioned.

At the time of our story Charles Denson held a fairly lucrative position as cashier and paymaster of the Break o' Day, never having qualified himself for the position of superintendent—a position he might have had, no doubt; and Minnie lived a life of leisure, as became her station.

On the morning succeeding the evening on which Aunt Dinah Bragg was so nearly fatally wounded, and at an early hour, Minnie Denson paid a visit to Rube Rittens's humble cottage, entering unannounced, as was her wont, she and Blue-eyed Belle being warm friends.

Blue-eyed Belle was just doing up the morning housework, and had her broom in her hand when Minnie came bounding in like a fugitive ray of sunshine, caught her in her arms and covered her face with kisses, exclaiming:

"Oh! you sly little puss! take that, and that, and that!"

Belle returned the caress, and as soon as she could, asked:

"What in the world has come over you, Minnie? Are you going crazy? Do you want to eat me alive?"

"Oh! how innocent we are!" and Minnie laughed merrily.

Blue-eyed Belle's face flushed for a moment, but the roses died away again almost immediately, leaving only an expression of mingled sorrow and pain.

Minnie was quick to notice it, and inquired:

"You are not offended, Belle?"

"No, Minnie, certainly not."

"Why, then, do you look so down-at-the-mouth like?—and so suddenly, too?"

"You were laughing so loudly I feared you would disturb Aunt Dinah," Belle answered, fibbing just a little.

"Oh! pray forgive me. Is Aunt Dinah ill?"

"Can it be that you have not heard?" in great surprise.

"Heard what? I have heard nothing."

"Why, Aunt Dinah was shot last night, and came very near being killed."

"Aunt Dinah shot! Oh! you are jesting."

"No, I am not. See there, the hole in the window where the bullet came through!"

Minnie looked, and sunk down upon the settee, pale and excited.

"Tell me all about it," she faltered. "Who was it shot her?"

"We do not know who it was."

"You do not know!"

"No."

"But, surely you must suspect some one, do you not?"

"Well, yes—or at least daddy does, and he and Aunt Dinah think the shot was fired at me."

"At you! Oh! you are frightening me to death! Who would shoot at you? and who could possibly have any reason to do so?"

"I do not know. I know as little about the matter as you do, almost."

"You say your father and Aunt Dinah suspect some one, though; whom do they suspect?"

"Daddy does not want me to tell any one, Minnie."

"But surely you will tell me."

"I hadn't ought to, Minnie, but if you will promise faithfully never to mention it, I will tell you."

"I promise, of course. Sit down here, now, and tell me everything. How thoughtless I am, though, not to inquire how good old Aunt Dinah is! She will not die, I trust."

"Oh! no," Belle answered, as she sat down beside her friend, "the doctor says she will not die. He has been here this morning. She is asleep now. When she wakes you may go in and see her."

"I am glad she will live. Now go ahead and tell me all about this strange affair. I am dying of curiosity."

And Blue-eyed Belle was "dying" to confide her secret to her friend. She was a woman, and women, we are told, cannot keep secrets. It is always—"If you promise not to mention it, I will tell you something. Mrs. A. told me that Mrs. B. told her in confidence that Mrs. C."—etc., etc., and away the secret goes until it soon becomes everybody's secret.

"I suppose you know one secret of mine already," Belle began.

"That you have promised to marry Charlie? Indeed, yes! He told me all about it last night, and oh! I'm so glad, for I love you so. That is what I was trying to 'eat you up' for."

"Yes, that is the secret I mean," said Belle sadly.

"Well, you are not going to cry about it, I hope. You are not sorry you have promised to be his wife and my sister, are you?"

"No, Minnie, I am not sorry I promised, for I did not know then what I know now; but I am sorry that my promise must be recalled."

"Mystery of mysteries! what do you mean? Why must you recall your promise?"

"Listen, and I will tell you. You have always supposed my name to be Belle Rittens, and that daddy is my father, have you not?"

"Why, certainly."

"It is not so."

"Not so?"

"No, it is not so. Daddy told me last night."

"Then who are you? What is your name?"

"Alas! I do not know," and the poor girl burst into tears.

"Oh! Belle, Belle!" cried Minnie, throwing her arms about her friend, her own eyes growing dim in tears of sympathy, "do not weep. Tell me what you have learned. It may not be so bad as you think."

"It could not well be worse. I am a nobody—a girl without a name—a waif. Daddy found me in Blue Stone Canyon, down on Canyon Trail, eighteen years ago."

"Good heavens! can this be true?"

"There is no doubt about it—it is only too true."

"And was there no clew to your identity?"

"Yes, there was one clew, which has just come to light, but so many years have passed that I fear it is of no use now."

"What is it?"

"It is this—a marriage-certificate," and as she spoke, Belle drew the document from the bosom of her dress, banded it to her friend, and then told her story as it is known to the reader.

"But," said Minnie, "it is not so bad as it might be, for this certificate proves that you are not a—a—"

"A child of shame? No, it does not; for who can say that I am their child?"

"True; but it is almost proof positive that you are, and all that remains to be done is to learn who Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett were, and what became of them."

"And how am I to set to work?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, but I suppose a detective will have to be had to search out the mystery."

"And where am I to find a detective?"

"Say, I'll tell you what to do; come to our house this afternoon and show this paper to papa—Colonel Dallas. If any one can advise you what to do, he can."

"Do you think he would?"

"Of course he will. Has he not always been kind to you?"

"Yes, he has always appeared so, whenever I have visited you, but this will be troubling him, and perhaps he will not like it."

"Oh! what nonsense! Papa likes you, for I have heard him say so, and I am sure he will be glad to assist you in this if he can. Now say you will come."

"I will ask daddy, Minnie, and if he is willing I will come, I think, if I can get one of Peleg Green's girls to come and stay with Aunt Dinah."

"Yes, you *must* come. But, you have not yet told me who it is whom daddy suspects of shooting Aunt Dinah, nor why they think the shot was fired at you."

This was true, and Belle explained the suspicion Rube had against Jared Kenneth, and why.

"It can not have been he," declared Minnie.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because, when Charlie told me last night that you had promised to become his wife, he said he had told no one else, and would not until he had formally asked your father—Mr. Rittens's consent. So, you see, Jared Kenneth knew nothing about it, and perhaps does not know it yet."

"That is so; I had not thought of it that way. But, if not Jared Kenneth, who then was it? Who else could have even the slightest cause to want me dead? I am sure I have never done wrong to any one in all my life."

"It is a mystery, Belle, and one I am unable to explain. Perhaps the shot was fired at Aunt Dinah, after all."

"Yes, it must have been; and yet, who is

there would want to remove such a harmless old woman?"

"I do not know—I cannot even guess, but I am sure it was not Jared Kenneth. He is a bold, bad man, and I do not like him; but I do not believe he would commit murder. It is barely possible that the shot was fired by accident."

"Yes, that is true."

"But, Belle, you surely do not mean to break with Charlie, as you say, do you?"

"What else can I do! What would *you* do? Would you consent to marry a man you love, if you had such a shadow hanging over you? Of course you would not, nor will I, even though Charlie would have me, as I fear the worst is yet to be learned. The cloud may be even thicker and darker than we think. No, no, it cannot be—it *shall not be!*"

"Your refusal will break Charlie's heart, for he was so happy when he told me he had won your promise."

"And it is breaking mine. You cannot comprehend how terrible my position is. When your brother asked me yesterday to become his wife, he asked me as the daughter of an honest man—Rube Rittens, and as such I promised; but to-day I am—who? Can I still say that I am the daughter of an honest man? What name could I give at the altar? No! a thousand times no! never will I marry until this mystery is cleared!"

Both girls were now in tears, and for some minutes no more was said.

Minnie was the first to speak.

"When will you tell Charlie?" she asked.

"As soon as I see him," Belle answered. "Is he at home?"

"No, he has gone to Denver, and will not be home until late this afternoon. He went over to the railroad on horseback, and will return the same way from the afternoon train."

"Well, if you see him before I do, please tell him not to speak to daddy until I see him, and to mention our engagement to no one. Will you do this?"

"Yes, willingly."

Just then Aunt Dinah awoke and called for Belle, and the two girls stepped into her room.

The old woman was doing well, but seemed to be greatly excited:

"Who 'm dar?" she inquired.

"I and Minnie," Belle answered.

"Oh! I's glad hit war only a dream. I done dreamed you was carried off, Missy Blue-eyes. Please give old Dine a drink ob water."

"No fear of any one carrying me off, I guess," declared Belle, as she poured a glass of water. "I guess your dream came from thinking of the secrets you revealed last night."

This was undoubtedly true, for it had been Aunt Dinah's haunting fear that if she told what she knew, Belle would be taken from her.

Half an hour longer Minnie Denson remained, and then returned home, after once more making Blue-eyed Belle promise to call on her in the afternoon.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIENDLY TURN.

KENTUCKY JEAN, after his visit to the newspaper offices, spent the remainder of the forenoon in loitering about the town and making himself familiar with its highways and byways.

After dinner at the hotel he lighted a cigar and strolled out again, this time crossing the bridge over Blue Stone Canyon and making his way northward through the woods on the road to the railroad station.

Those who saw him leave town supposed he was merely going for a walk, so leisurely did he proceed, but had they known that he kept on and on, until he had laid some five or six miles behind him, they would have believed he had some objective point in view.

And so he had.

After crossing Blue Stone Canyon, the road led through a thick woods for a distance of two miles. Then came a rugged trail over an uneven country for two or three miles more, and then the trail passed into a canyon between towering hills. This canyon was about two miles in length, and from the canyon on to the railroad the road was tolerably good.

When Kentucky Jean entered this canyon, still walking slowly as when he started, he paused for a moment and glanced at his watch.

"Plenty of time," he mused. "I've a good hour yet, according to the plans I overheard. Ha, ha, ha! there will be a surprise for somebody, if I can only find the right place."

Replacing his watch he strolled on into the canyon.

Presently he came to a point where the canyon narrowed to a mere pass, barely wide enough for the daily stages to get through, and where the skill of the drivers was taxed to the utmost.

This place was about a quarter of a mile in length, and before any stage or wagon entered it, a man was always sent ahead on foot to prevent any wagon or other conveyance from entering in the opposite direction. Finding all clear, the advance guard would shout to the driver to come on. Thus a "block" in the

pass was always prevented when the precaution was taken.

On one side of this pass the wall was as smooth as the walls of a palace almost, while on the other it was rough and jagged to the other extreme. Great masses of rock hung here and there overhead, seemingly ready to fall at any moment, while here and there were great cracks, some of which were large enough to conceal a horse and rider.

One of the latter was particularly large, amounting in fact to a natural grotto.

When he reached this point, Kentucky Jean stopped again.

"This must be the place," he mused, "and now to find a niche where I can stow myself away without fear of discovery."

Looking all around, the sport soon found the place he desired. Just to the right of the large cave was a smaller one, above which was a large overhanging rock, and to the right of that again was a crevice that seemed to be about large enough to hold a man comfortably.

To clamber to the top of the rock mentioned was but the work of a moment for the agile youth, and from the rock into the niche was but a step.

"Just the place," he decided, "if this is the right point, and I have every reason to believe it is. Anyhow, if I see nothing of the rascals I can warn Charlie Denson when he comes along, provided they don't go for him further up the road. If they come along first, and don't stop here, then I'll scramble down and mosey right on after them. I'm bound to have a hand in this game somewhere."

Rolling a stone into the place he had selected, he sat down upon it, and then examined his revolvers.

"All in order," he muttered, "and now let the curtain rise."

Half an hour later two masked men came in sight, coming from the direction of Bended Bow. They were on foot, and when they came to the cave they stopped.

"This is th' place ye mean, hain't it?" one inquired.

"Yes," the other answered, "this is th' place. Git right in thar now, an' out o' sight, fer we don't want ter be seen when th' stage comes erlong."

"No, ye're right we don't. Come on," and the pair disappeared into the cave.

A short time later a stage came along and passed, with the usual precaution, and then the two men could be heard talking, but the sport could not make out what they said.

Another half hour passed, and then the hoof-strokes of a horse were heard, coming from the northward, and soon after a horseman came in sight, riding at an easy canter.

This was Charles Denson, returning from his morning trip to Denver.

He was sitting in the saddle with an easy, unconscious grace, and evidently wholly unsuspecting of danger, seeming to be enjoying a happy day-dream as he rode along.

When he neared the point where the two masked men whom we have seen were in waiting, there his dream was rudely broken.

Springing suddenly out in front of the horse, the rascals cried out:

"Whoop, Sally Ann! Hold yer hoss, mister, an' hold up yer hands, er else ye'll go ter glory mighty quicker!"

"Whoa!" cried the young man, drawing rein instantly, taken completely by surprise, "what does this mean?"

"It means hands up, that's what," one of the men returned, "an' ye want ter be soon about it, too. Hol' on! don't ye go fer ter reach fer no pops, young feller, fer if ye do down ye drops. Hands up!"

There was no help for it, for each of the men held a cocked revolver in hand, so Charles Denson was obliged to obey, and raised his hands as ordered.

"What do you want?" he demanded in anger.

"We wants yer wealth," was the reply. "We knows ye've been ter Denver ter square yer month's account with th' U. S. Branch Mint, an' we wants ther ducats."

"Why, you fools! you don't suppose I have the cash with me, do you? Not much! It is safe in one of the Denver banks; so, you have had your trouble for nothing."

This evidently took the would-be Dick Turpins a little aback.

"No matter 'bout that," the spokesman soon blurted out, "we'll go through ye all th' same an' see what ye *have* got. We'll take yer word after we knows fer ourselves. Keep him covered, pard, an' I'll feel through his clothes."

"All right, pard, I'll bore him if he moves. Ye want ter hurry, though, fer somebody will be comin' erlong."

"Yes, I'll hurry. Come, mister, git right down offen that ar' hoss now. Jest toss yer leg over an' drop, but don't let yer hands come down an inch. Yer life 'pends on yer holdin' 'em up, an' keepin' 'em up, too."

"Gentlemen, I—"

As quick as a flash the highwaymen both turned and looked up, and taking advantage of the moment, Charles Denson dropped his hands and drew a revolver.

"The tables are turned, I fancy," he said. They were indeed.

When the two men had looked around and up, they beheld Kentucky Jean standing out upon the rock above them, a revolver in each hand; and when the next moment they turned back to their victim, they found also *his* weapon turned against them. They were trapped.

"Gentlemen," said the sport, "I was about to remark that I was sorry to interrupt you, but it seemed to me that two to one was hardly fair, and I thought I would make it an equal thing—two to two. Now things are a little more even. How do you like it?"

"Cuss ye! we'll show—"

"Hold on! if you raise your hand one inch you will hear something fall! Now let your weapons drop, or we'll plug you; eh, stranger?"

"We will, and no mistake," Denson confirmed. "Let 'em drop, you rogues! or pay the forfeit with your miserable lives."

The rascals let their weapons fall from their nerveless hands. They saw that resistance was worse than useless, and gave up.

"That's where you show your sense, my fine fellows," Kentucky Jean declared. And he added:

"Now, stranger, you keep them where they are, and I'll hustle down from here and take care of them."

"All right, I'll hold them."

Kentucky Jean replaced his revolvers in his belt, and was not long in getting down, when he proceeded to make prisoners of the two would-be robbers by tying their hands securely behind them with strong string.

"Now," he said, when he had secured them, "let's see your faces;" and as he pulled away the cloth masks they wore, the two shame-faced rascals stood forth confessed.

"Do you know them?" he asked, turning to Denson.

"Yes," Denson answered, "I do. One is a discharged employee of the Break o' Day mine at Bended Bow, and the other is a disreputable character of that town."

"And I suppose you want to take them to town as prisoners?"

"Certainly, now that we have them—thanks to you, I will see that they are given a taste of the law. May I inquire your name, stranger?"

"My name is Jean Grantley, sir. Yours, I believe, is Charles Denson?" with an interrogative inflection.

"Yes. How came you to know it? if I may ask."

"I got the information from these worthy gentlemen—no thanks to them, however."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. But, do not let me detain you, sir, for I am going to Bended Bow, and will bring these men with me."

"Thanks for the offer, but I am in no haste, and we can accompany each other. Come, you two rogues, walk on ahead, and remember the first move you make will bring a bullet after you, if it is a move to escape."

"And remember, too," supplemented the sport, "that I seldom miss the target I shoot at."

Sullenly the rascals started off as ordered, and Charles Denson and Kentucky Jean followed them a few paces behind.

Denson offered to let the sport ride if he would, but of course the offer was declined.

"It was lucky for me, Mr. Grantley, that you happened to be on hand," Denson presently remarked.

"I did not 'happen' to be there," the sport returned, "I came from Bended Bow on purpose to defeat the plans of those rascals."

"You did!"

"Yes."

"Why, how came you to know anything about the matter?"

"I overheard their plan."

"Oh! I see. And you set out to lend me a hand."

"Exactly."

"Well, allow me to thank you, sir. I was in a bad fix, for they had the 'drop' on me in fine style."

"Yes, I heard them laying their plans, and resolved to block their game if I could do so. I heard them saying Charlie Denson had gone to Denver to square an account at the Branch Mint, and would return in the afternoon. Then they debated and decided upon ways and means to waylay and rob you. I drank in every word, and after dinner I came out here and waited to play my part."

"You played it well, and I must thank you."

"Don't mention it. You would have done the same under the circumstances, I am sure."

"I hope so, at any rate."

"I know you would."

Charles Denson could not desist from looking at the young man walking at his side. The attraction lay in his face.

"My friend," he remarked, after a pause, "do you know that you remind me of some one?"

"No; do I?"

"Yes, you remind me of a young lady of Bended Bow."

"Of Rube Rittens's daughter?"

"Yes, her. But, how came you to guess? Are you acquainted there?"

"No, I am not. I spent last night there, however, and heard it remarked several times that I resemble the person I named. Do you know her?"

"Yes, I know her. In fact, she and I are warm friends."

"And you insist that I look like her, eh?"

"You do, indeed. You are much darker than she is, though."

"I am naturally curious to see the lady."

After a pause, Denson inquired:

"By the way, are you the man I heard spoken of this morning as Kentucky Jean?"

"That is what I am called, sir."

"Then you must be the person who had the trouble with our superintendent, Jared Kenneth, at the hotel last night. I heard it spoken about at the mine. The men say you knocked him silly. He has a beautifully discolored eye."

"Yes, I am the man—or boy—and he deserved it. I do not remember my dead mother, Mr. Denson, but any man who takes it upon himself to sully her name in my hearing shall feel the weight of my fist."

"You did perfectly right. Let me warn you, though, to have an eye upon that man hereafter. He will strike back if he can."

"Let him do so. I am wide awake at most times, and will do my best to entertain him when he calls."

"I can well believe that."

And so the two talked as they proceeded, first about one thing and then another, and by the time they arrived at Bended Bow they were like old friends; and when they parted, after disposing of their prisoners, Denson invited the sport to call and see him at home.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

LATER in the afternoon Colonel Damon Dallas might have been seen pacing to and fro across the floor of the library in his residence, in a very agitated state of mind.

In his right hand he held two newspapers tightly clutched, a copy each of *The Bow* and *The Arrow*, which had been delivered by a newsboy a few minutes previously.

Several turns up and down he took, and then stopped and looked at the papers once more, reading half-aloud.

"Wanted, he perused; 'to find one Delwin Mourton, who left Denver, Col., about the year 1864. Any person giving information concerning him or his present whereabouts will be liberally rewarded.'"

"Fiends of perdition!" he exclaimed; "what can this mean? And the information is wanted by Dobson & Blake, of Denver, who, some time ago, advertised for the heirs of James Gernett. Can there be any connection between this and that? Can it be that there is property at stake? Or is it— But, Delwin Mourton is dead. All the property in the case can do him no good now, nor can—"

He finished the sentence with an angry gesture, and continued pacing the floor.

"Yes," he presently mused, "I must learn what is at stake. It may be something concerning that old mine usurped by the Imperial Mining Company some years ago. No doubt they want to find Delwin Mourton in order to learn something of Gernett's heirs, having found that he married Sibyl Gernett; but Delwin Mourton is dead."

"Oh, if that girl only had some proof of her identity! Poor child! poor child! And I am powerless to undo the wrong, though gladly would I do so for her sake if I could. Oh, that I could open the way for her to prove herself the child of Sibyl Gernett and the grandchild of James Gernett, so that she might wrest her own from that mining company ere it is too late!"

"But it cannot be done. I have tried time and again to devise some means of doing so, but in vain. No, it is impossible. As Belle Rittens she is known, and so she must remain."

Presently there came a light knock at the door.

"Come in," the colonel invited, every trace of his recent agitation gone in an instant.

The door opened and Minnie Denson entered, followed by Blue-eyed Belle.

"I thought we should find you here at this hour, papa," Minnie remarked.

Both she and her brother called Colonel Dallas "papa," or "father."

"Yes," the colonel responded, "I am generally to be found here about this hour of the day." And then turning to Belle and extending his hand, he added:

"Miss Rittens, I am glad to see you. How do you do?"

Belle took the proffered hand, or—and more properly, perhaps—gave hers, replying:

"I am well, I thank you, Colonel Dallas, and hope you are."

"Quite well, I thank you."

"And, papa," Minnie announced, "Belle has come this time on purpose to see you."

"To see me?" and the colonel looked at both the girls in a questioning manner.

"Yes, sir," Blue-eyed Belle affirmed, "I have come to see you; but I do not want to trouble you unless you have time to spare."

"My time is yours," the colonel declared, "and if I can be of service to you in any way, you have but to command me."

"There!" cried Minnie, "what did I tell you, Belle?"

"What can I do for you?" Colonel Dallas asked. "What is it you want?"

"I want to know who I am, who was my mother, where— Oh! are you ill?"

Colonel Dallas had suddenly turned as pale as a ghost, and grasped the table for support.

"Oh! what is it, papa?" cried Minnie, as she, too, sprung to his side.

"It is nothing—nothing," the colonel protested, as he sunk down upon a chair. "It was only a sudden stitch in my side. I am subject to them. I shall be all right in a moment."

"Can we get you anything, or do anything for you?" asked Belle.

"No, my girl, nothing. It has passed away now. I shall be all right soon."

"Perhaps I had better not trouble you with my story to-day. I can call again."

"No, no, tell me now, all—everything. I will give you all the advice I can. But, I hardly know what you mean. Do you not know who you are, and who your mother was?"

"No, I do not. I am a child without a name."

"Good heavens! do you mean to tell me Rube Rittens is not your father?"

"Mr. Rittens is not my father."

"And can he not tell you who is? He is surely a relative."

"He knows no more than I do, sir. But I will tell you my story, and then you will understand why I come to you for advice."

"Yes, do so."

In a low, clear tone, then, Blue-eyed Belle began and told the story as we have told it in the preceding chapters.

Colonel Dallas listened attentively, his eyes fixed upon the floor, his lips compressed, and his face pale. Nor did he move or speak until some moments after the girl had ceased speaking. Then of a sudden he looked up, and gazed at the face of the beautiful girl, his eyes dimmed with tears.

"Your story touches my heart," he said, as he passed his hand before his eyes to clear them, "and I will do everything in my power to help you. Where is that certificate you speak of?"

Belle drew it from her pocket and handed it to him.

Opening it, the colonel read it aloud, and then paused suddenly and said:

"Mourton—Mourton—surely I have heard or seen that name before, but where? Let me see. I— Ah! now I remember. Minnie, please to hand me those newspapers from the table there."

Minnie Denson picked up the two papers from the table where Colonel Dallas had thrown them on hearing the knock at the door, and the colonel, making a little pretense of not being able to find what he wanted readily, presently turned to the advertisement concerning Delwin Mourton, and read it out.

"You see," he remarked, "the name is the same, and no doubt refers to the same person. The certificate is dated Eighteen and Sixty-three, and this advertisement states that Delwin Mourton left Denver about a year later. There is no room for doubt on this point."

"And you think this man was my father?" Belle questioned, in tremulous tones.

"I do," was the firm response. "In my mind there is not the shadow of a doubt about it. The fact that this certificate was found on your person when you were an infant removes all uncertainty. It was no doubt placed there by your mother."

"And she?"

"Alas! who can tell?"

"But, Colonel Dallas, the fact that this certificate was found on me is no proof that I am the child of the persons it mentions, is it?"

"True, it is not;" and the colonel let his chin fall upon his breast despondently.

"Then I am no better off with it than I would be without it, am I?"

"Oh! yes you are," raising his head instantly to reply, "for at the very least it is a clue, and with it an able lawyer may be able to win a fortune for you."

"Win a fortune for me? What do you mean?"

"Just this: It is certain that Dobson & Blake would never advertise for Delwin Mourton unless they were paid for doing so, or expected to make something out of it; consequently there may be some property at stake, and the heirs of this Delwin Mourton are wanted. Or, it may be— Ah! I believe I see through it now. What was the name of the woman whom Delwin Mourton married?"

"Her name was Sibyl Gernett," Blue-eyed Belle answered, glancing at the certificate, it having been handed back to her.

"That explains it!" the colonel exclaimed. "I understand it all!"

"You understand it all?"

"I believe I do."

"Pray tell me, then, for you cannot appreciate how anxious I am."

"Yes, papa," Minnie added, "do tell us, for I am as anxious as Belle. I knew if any one could advise her in the matter, it was you."

"And I am glad that I can," Colonel Dallas declared, adding:

"Yes, I think I see the case in a clearer light now. I have been trying to recall where I have seen or heard the name 'Gernett,' and it has just come to me. Minnie, can you find a Denver paper about the house?—one that is two or three months old?"

"I guess so, papa," Minnie answered, all alive with interest and curiosity; "I will search for one."

"Please do so."

The girl crossed the room and opened one of the lower doors of a combined bookcase and writing-desk, drew out a pile of papers of various kinds, and soon found what was required.

"Yes," she cried, "here is one," and she hastened to hand it to her step-father.

After a few moments' search the colonel found what he wanted, and read:

"PERSONAL.—The heirs of James Gernett, who died at Denver, Col., in 1864, will learn of something greatly to their interest by addressing Dobson & Blake, Denver, Col."

"And one of the names on that certificate, the signature of one of the witnesses, is, if I mistake not, 'James Gernett.'"

"Yes," Belle confirmed, "it is."

"Then you, my girl, are the wanted heir. You are the daughter of Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett, and the granddaughter of this James Gernett. Your name is Belle Mourton."

"But, Colonel Dallas, how—oh! tell me—how am I to prove my identity?"

Again the man's chin dropped upon his breast, and for some minutes he was silent.

It has been shown, by his words in soliloquy which open this chapter, and by his manner and words afterward in conversation with the two girls, that he knew more about the mystery of Blue-eyed Belle than he cared to reveal. What was it? What knew he concerning Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett? If he knew aught, why did he not reveal it?—and he certainly did know. "Oh! if that girl but had some proof of her identity," we have seen him exclaim, adding—"And I am powerless to undo the wrong, though gladly would I do so, for her sake, if I could." And this was before he was aware that the girl knew anything about the mystery that hung over her life. Now she came to him with the very proof we have seen him declare he had time and again tried to obtain.

Verily there was a mystery here, and one in which Colonel Damon Dallas was seemingly concerned in no small degree. Had there been foul play? Had Delwin Mourton been removed, and was there a weighty reason why Colonel Dallas could not—or dared not—reveal what he knew?

Be that as it might, and be the secret what it would, he was clearly playing a double role. What that role was, ensuing chapters must disclose.

When the man again raised his head, his face was quite pale and his eyes were tear-dimmed as before.

"My poor child," he said, laying his hand gently upon Belle's head—she was still upon her knees beside his chair, where she and Minnie had dropped a few minutes previously when the colonel had appeared ill;—"whatever can be done to prove your identity, I promise you I will do. When you return home—or when Rube Rittens gets home, ask him to come and see me. He is your guardian, so to speak, and I will consult with him. One thing is plain: We must correspond with Dobson & Blake, and ascertain what is wanted, and if they are favorable to your interests, we will put the case into their hands."

"How can I ever thank you?" Belle murmured.

"I ask no thanks. I am sorry for you, I take a friendly interest in you, and if anything can be done, it will be a pleasure for me to do it. I want no thanks."

"But I must thank you, sir," Belle insisted, as she rose, "and I shall not forget your kindness."

Just then Charles Denson entered the room.

CHAPTER XII.

A PAPER LOST.

THE moment he entered, Charles Denson was quick to notice that something of more than ordinary importance had been the subject of conversation.

He saw that Colonel Dallas was unusually excited, and that Minnie and Belle were none the less so.

As for Blue-eyed Belle, her face grew white at once. This was the first time she had seen her lover since learning the secret which would now make it impossible for her to marry him.

With a word to the colonel and Minnie, the young man advanced at once to Belle, and asked:

"What has happened? Why are you so pale—why do you tremble so? I trust old Aunt Dinah is no worse. I have just learned of that mysterious affair of last night."

"No, she is no worse; she is better," Belle replied. "She is in no danger."

"I am glad to hear that. But what, then, is

the trouble? Surely, you and Minnie have not been quarreling?"

"Indeed, no!" Belle exclaimed.

"Of course not!" Minnie added.

"What, then, has been going on? Have you both been fighting with father?" and he turned toward the colonel.

"Not so, my boy," the colonel assured. "It is something far different. Belle came to me for advice, and I have been doing my best to advise her rightly."

The young man turned to Belle again, caught her hands, and inquired:

"May I ask you to confide in me also? Is there anything I can do for you? You know I am more than willing."

"Yes—yes, you shall know—you must know—all. Minnie will tell you." And gently withdrawing her hands from those of her lover, Belle sunk down upon a chair and began to weep.

"Tell me, Minnie, tell me what has occurred," the young man urged. "This suspense is terrible."

Briefly, then, Minnie Denson retold the story of the discoveries Blue-eyed Belle had made, to which Charles listened with intense interest.

"And," Minnie concluded, "she has resolved to recall her promise to you until the mystery shall have been cleared away."

"My God! no, she does not mean it!" Charles cried; and regardless of the presence of Colonel Dallas, he threw himself upon his knee before the weeping girl, and again took her hands in his. "Tell me, Belle," he implored, "oh! tell me that you do not mean it!"

"What else can I do?" the poor girl sobbed. "How can I marry you, with no name to call my own? No, no, it cannot—must not—shall not be!"

"But, my darling, think: Suppose the mystery is never cleared?"

"Then I shall never become your wife."

"You surely do not mean it."

"I mean it. Until I know this secret of the past, I shall never marry."

"Oh! this is terrible. But, the mystery shall be cleared—I swear it!"

The young man was now upon his feet again, and turning to Colonel Dallas, he said:

"Father, from the words just spoken, you of course understand that Belle has promised to become my wife, and now recalls the promise."

"Yes, my boy."

"And declares that she will never marry me until the secret is made known."

"Yes, I understand."

"And we all know Blue-eyed Belle of Bended Bow well enough to know that she means what she says, do we not?"

"Yes, Charlie, my boy, we do."

"Then, father, it remains for me to find out the secret. Will you aid me?"

"I will. I have just promised to do all in my power to solve the mystery and restore the poor girl to her name and rights."

"Thank you. And you, Belle, when the truth is made known, will you then become mine, no matter what the secret of the past is?"

"Suppose, though, you learn that my father's hand was stained with crime, or that my mother's name bore the stigma of shame?" Belle warned.

"It does not matter. Let it be one or both, you are not to blame for their misdeeds. Let the secret of the past be what it may, you are innocent of all wrong."

"But, you know the sins of the parent are visited upon the child, and—"

"And never was there a law more unjust. It is almost enough to make one doubt the justice and mercy of the All-Father. But you did not answer my question. Will you become my wife when this mystery is made known, no matter what the secret of the past may be?"

"If, when the past is laid bare," the girl answered firmly, "you find me worthy of you, and then ask me to marry you, I will say—yes."

"God bless you!" and catching her in his arms, the young man pressed a kiss upon her lips.

"And bless you, too!" cried Minnie, as she gave her brother a vigorous hug; "I knew you would hold her to her promise in one way or another."

"I shall, you may be sure," Charles replied, as he returned the embrace.

"And God bless you both," said Colonel Dallas, his lips trembling as he spoke.

"Now," said Charles, "let us all sit down and talk this matter over calmly. In the first place, has any one any idea in regard to the mysterious shooting affair of last night?"

Blue-eyed Belle was the first to reply.

"No," she answered, "it is a profound mystery, but I am inclined to think the shot was fired by accident."

"I do not agree with you," Colonel Dallas remarked.

"You do not?"

"No."

"What then is your idea?" asked Charles.

"My idea is just the reverse—that the shot was fired intentionally."

"Why do you think so? It seems to me quite probable that it may have been an accident."

"Yes, it would seem so were it not for one thing."

"And what is that?"

"Have you seen the full account in this afternoon's papers?"

"No, I have not. And I left home at an early hour, and so learned no more about the matter than I heard last night."

"No doubt you heard all there was to be learned then. You forget that a shot was fired into the office of the Break o' Day a little earlier in the evening, do you not?"

"Ah! true enough. And you think the same person fired both shots and therefore the shots were intentional."

"Exactly."

"Well, have you any idea who that person was?"

"Not the slightest. All we know is that it was a woman."

"A woman!"

"Yes; have you not heard all about that before this?"

"No."

"Here, read it. The paper gives a pretty correct account."

As he spoke the colonel handed the newspaper to the young man, who turned to the account of the shooting and read it interestedly.

"Well, this is surpassing strange," he declared.

"It is indeed," Minnie agreed.

"In the first instance," Charles pursued, "the intended victim was no doubt Kenneth, do you not think so, father?"

"I cannot bring myself to believe the shot was fired at me," was the answer, "nor do I know that it was fired at Kenneth. I am utterly at loss to account for it in any way whatever. Who could possibly have any object in killing either me or him? much less Blue-eyed Belle or old Aunt Dinah? The only reasonable theory I can advance is that it was the work of some deranged person."

"That may be it!" cried Belle. "I had not given it much thought in that direction."

"Nor I," asserted Minnie. "I am inclined to believe papa is right."

"I hope he is, at any rate," added Belle. "It is hard to believe there is a would-be murderer in our pretty town who is seeking our lives."

"Be that as it may," Charles commented, "the fact is still the same—that shots have been fired, and care must be taken to apprehend the person who fired them, sane or insane. If any suspicious characters are seen around, they must be looked after."

"You are right on that point," the colonel agreed, "and such steps have been taken."

"What I was coming at, though," the young man continued, "was to warn you, Belle, to be careful not to expose yourself to danger again, now that you are warned. If that shot *was* intended to strike you, the attempt may be made again. You must be careful."

"I shall be, as far as it is possible to keep from danger; but such danger may be lurking in the most unsuspected place."

"Quite true; but be careful. And now to return to the question of proving your identity. In the first place we must communicate with Dobson & Blake. Was that your idea, father?"

"It was."

"Have you any idea in regard to why they advertise for this Delwin Mourton?"

"Yes, I have."

"And what is it?"

Colonel Dallas explained, as in the last preceding chapter.

"By heavens!" cried Charles, springing to his feet, "I believe I see still further into this mystery than you have penetrated, father."

"You do?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, what new discovery have you made?"

"Why, these names you mention remind me of some items of news I learned at Denver today."

"How—what did you learn?"

"I will tell you. You say that you believe Blue-eyed Belle is the daughter of Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett, and the grandchild of James Gernett."

"Yes."

"And such being the fact, she is, in the absence of her mother—Sibyl Mourton, James Gernett's lawful heir."

"She is."

"Well, I have learned this: One Gardner Gernett, from England, claiming to be a brother to the dead James Gernett, has entered suit against the Imperial Mining Company for the recovery of his brother's property."

"Heavens!" cried Colonel Dallas, bounding to his feet and pacing the floor excitedly, "can this be true?"

"It is certainly true. I learned it all at the hotel where I took dinner."

"And that property—"

"That property is worth a million if it is worth a penny."

"Oh! Belle," cried Minnie Denson, "just to think it!"

"Yes," added Charles, "you are heiress to a mine worth a million, or perhaps more."

"Who can prove that I am?" the pale and

trembling girl asked in low, sorrowful tones. "Who can prove who I am?"

"By heavens! you *are* the heir!" Colonel Dallas fairly thundered, adding instantly: "I do not not see how any one can for a moment doubt it."

"No, nor I," echoed Minnie.

"Whether you are or not," Charles declared, "the mystery of your identity shall be dispelled. But, like father and Minnie, I feel confident that you are the child of the persons named in this certificate. In my mind there does not exist the shadow of a doubt; and you shall be restored to your name and rights. Again I swear it."

"But this Gardner Gernett," Colonel Dallas commented, "what are his intentions? Does he mean to rob the rightful heir if he can? or is he fighting the case simply to wrest the property from the mining company, in order to bestow it where it rightfully belongs? This is a question of no little importance."

"Doubtful if it is the latter," the young man insinuated.

"I do not know that," the colonel debated. "This advertising for other heirs seems to point that way."

"Well, you may be right. The way to find out, though, is to correspond with Dobson & Blake; and the sooner the better."

"You are right."

For some time longer the conversation was carried on, as the case was reviewed in every possible light and debated on all sides, and then the girls left the room.

Some time later Charles went out, and Colonel Dallas was left alone.

"After all these years," he mused, as he paced to and fro, "this old case comes again to light. It has come and burst like a very bomb. What is to come of it? Alas! I wish I could tell. Oh! if I could but recall the past and undo the wrong—But it can never be. The die is cast, and Delwin Mourtou is dead—dead." And letting his head drop forward until his chin rested upon his breast, he paced to and fro, to and fro, until the shades of night began to settle down and he was called to tea.

In the mean time Blue-eyed Belle had gone home, eager to tell Aunt Dinah—and Rube, when he came—of what she had learned. Arriving there, her first care was to lay away the certificate of marriage; but when she put her hand into her pocket to get it, it was gone. In alarm did she search for it, but it was not to be found. Nor did she find it, though she retraced her steps to a point where she remembered assuring herself it was safe after leaving the Dallas residence.

The certificate was lost.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE WOMAN.

SOMEWHERE along in the preceding columns, mention has been made of one Euphemia Wiggins, a fair young widow of thirty-nine, who owned a house and lot, and had a goodly number of paying mining shares, left her by the late lamented, etc.

It is now our pleasure to bring this lady forward and introduce her.

She was, as stated, crowding along to forty years of age, but still retained much of her youthful attractiveness, and was as plump and fair as could be expected.

Her home was a neat little cottage in a quiet part of the town, and was all that any lone, lorn widow could desire.

But Euphemia Wiggins did not live quite alone.

About fifteen years prior to the time of our story, when she and her husband were emigrating to the West from one of the Eastern States, with a number of other families, their little camp was startled one morning to find a party of Indians in the vicinity.

Preparations were made at once to repel an attack, if one was intended, but the guide soon ascertained that the Indians were inclined to be friendly.

After a little while two of them rode forward, and it was seen that one of their horses bore a double burden; and when they came near, it was found that the third personage was a woman.

She did not seem to be a day over twenty-five or six, but her hair was as white as snow.

The two Indians stopped at a little distance from the camp and asked if they might enter, and being told to do so, came on.

When they drew rein again they dismounted and lifted the woman to the ground, and then it was noticed at once that she was insane. There was a wild and vacant expression in her eyes that could be accounted for in no other way.

One of the Indians made a few remarks in the most meager English imaginable, touching his forehead with his finger, then pointing to the woman, and then waving his hand toward the camp; and then he and his companion mounted again and rode leisurely back to their party, leaving the woman behind, and soon the whole party was galloping away across the plains.

What the Indian had said, was to the effect that the woman was not sound in her mind;

that she had been found by a hunting-party belonging to their tribe, many months previously; and that they desired to restore her to her own race, as she was a burden on their hands. He called her the "child-woman."

The woman was clad in Indian dress, and from what the Indian had said, the guide estimated that she had been with the tribe at least two or three years.

But that was of little importance to the emigrants. The question with them was—what were they to do with her? And that question was easily answered, since there was but one course open, and that was—to take her with them. This was the necessity of the case. The next question was—what was to be done with her eventually?

That question was decided by Euphemia Wiggins. The woman's features, she said, reminded her of a dead and gone aunt, and she felt that she had been sent to her for care and protection. She felt that an all-seeing Providence had called upon her to do an act of charity by taking the forlorn creature into her heart and home, and, with her husband's consent, she would do her duty. Mr. Wiggins, he whom we now speak of as the "late lamented," was willing to acknowledge that Providence was a great fellow, but he doubted his having any especial grudge against him, and therefore could not quite accept his wife's view of the matter; but, if she insisted, why—Well, he was willing.

So, to the great relief of all the other emigrants, the fate of the "child-woman" was decided. She was to be taken care of by Euphemia Wiggins—with the consent of Mr. Wiggins, because Providence had so ordered it.

And this woman was with the fair young widow still, and to her we allude in saying that Euphemia did not live quite alone.

When she was delivered up by the Indians, as explained, she knew absolutely no language save the Indian tongue, and but little of that. She was like a child, and the Indians had not misnamed her in calling her the "child-woman." She knew no more than a child.

After a time, however, she began to observe and imitate; began to pick up words and form sentences in English; and by degrees the wild and vacant expression left her eyes, and she became sane.

But her knowledge of herself dated from the time she was delivered to the emigrants by the Indians. She remembered that; but beyond that point her life was a blank.

Who she was, where she came from, what her name was—nobody knew.

Euphemia Wiggins called her "Belinda," after the "dead and gone" aunt whom she fancied she resembled, and as "Aunt Belinda" she was known; and if any one was curious enough to inquire her last name, then the name of the aforesaid aunt (who was "dead and gone") was given in full—"Belinda Dix." But, few ever inquired.

Aunt Belinda grew to be a strange woman. It could no longer be said that she was insane, for she was sane. It could not be said that she was foolish, for she was not. Still there was a certain something wanting, though what that something was, it was not easy to define. Full a quarter of a century of her life was a blank, as of course she knew now, and it may have been this fact constantly preying upon her mind that made her seem unlike other people.

Be that as it might, there was something lacking somewhere.

And of late she had become still more of a mystery than ever to her protectress. She had fallen into a habit of sitting for hours with her eyes fixed, gazing into vacancy, seeing nothing—hearing nothing; and at such times Euphemia found it necessary to shake her before she could arouse her to her surroundings.

On several occasions Euphemia had allowed her to sit in her dream as long as she would, and at such times she would always come back to her sense of being with a sudden start, and perhaps with a cry. Once she had sprung to her feet, her face a very picture of terror, uttered a piercing scream, and fell fainting to the floor. And since then Euphemia had never allowed her to fall into one of her spells of stupor if she could hinder it, which was not always possible, for the spells were becoming more and more frequent every year.

On the evening in which occurred the events recorded in our opening chapters, and about the time when the "little fracas" between Kentucky Jean and Jared Kenneth was taking place in the Everybody's Home, Euphemia and Aunt Belinda were seated in the sitting-room of the little cottage, talking pleasantly and sewing.

Their conversation was concerning the mystery of Aunt Belinda, which had been discussed between them thousands of times.

"No," the strange woman remarked, after a pause in their talk, "it will never be known. My life up to that time is a blank, and will always remain a blank."

"It certainly seems so," Euphemia responded. "Still, it may all come back to you some time."

"True, it may. And do you know—or can you believe—that I am in dread of it? I believe there is some terrible event just behind this veil

which obscures my past, and that I am better off to be ignorant of it."

"Do you believe that?"

"I do."

"And why?"

"I will tell you why. At times, when I sit and dream—dream, striving to force my memory back to other years and other scenes, there comes a momentary gleam of the past. But it is only a gleam, like a single ray of sunshine through a rift in the black clouds of a stormy day, and the moment I glance up to catch a glimpse of the sun from which it is emitted, the black clouds shut down again, and the darkness is as profound as before."

"In that one brief moment, though, the recollection of some awful event flashes upon my memory, just at the moment when the veil is lifting, and the shock it gives me is so sudden—so terrible—that I am instantly aroused to my surroundings, and all is lost again."

"This is why I dread—why I fear the truth of the past. I believe, as I said, there is some terrible event just beyond these dark clouds, and it may be that I have been guilty of some heinous crime."

Had Euphemia Wiggins been a close observer, she would have long since discovered the fact that this strange woman's language was indicative of her having been in the past a woman of education. She, Euphemia, had taught her to read and write, 'tis true; but she had not been able to teach her grammar to any extent, much less to inculcate by example such figures as she frequently employed in speaking. Nor had the strange woman's reading or companionship been of a nature to guide her to such a degree of perfection. Clearly she had been, as remarked, a woman of education, and her gift of language had come to her unconsciously from out the mystic past. Nor was this all, as Euphemia might have found, had she been of a philosophical turn. The woman not infrequently sung snatches of old airs, and now and then in conversation let fall a word of Latin or French. Slowly but surely, whatever the past was, the memory of it was dawning upon Aunt Belinda's mind.

"Oh! I can't believe that!" Euphemia exclaimed instantly. "I am sure you have never wronged any one."

"Who can tell?"

"No one can tell, of course; but your nature is not evil. You are goodness itself."

"My nature may have changed, though. I may have been a wicked woman—a very fiend, Oh! if I could but know. And yet I dread the truth—I fear the revelation."

"It may be as you say," Euphemia admitted, "but I do not believe it. You a wicked woman—never!"

"I certainly hope I have not been such, and that I have never harmed any one. I should go mad indeed to learn that my hand is stained with crime."

"It is not, it is not!"

"Well, I shall never know. As I said, the past is a blank, and as such it will ever remain."

"It may, but who can tell? But, whatever the secret of the past may be, if it ever comes to light, believe me I shall still be your friend. Providence sent you to me, and I shall do my duty. Not only that, dear, but I have learned to love you, and you shall never leave me."

"So you have told me many times before, and I believe you. Some time in the future I may need your love and friendship more than ever in the past."

"And when that time comes I will prove my words. Come what may, you may depend on me. As I told dear Abram (the late lamented), you were sent to me by Providence, and I shall be true to my trust. All I ask in return is your love and confidence."

"And you have both. If the shadow is ever dispelled, no matter how terrible be the truth it discloses, you shall know all."

"You may freely trust me."

"Oh! if there were only some proof of my identity—some clew to this dark mystery. But there is nothing—nothing."

"No, there is nothing. When you came to us you were clad in Indian dress, and did not wear even a ring. The only mark of any kind was—"

"This blood-red star on my arm?"

"Yes."

As she spoke, the strange woman pulled up the loose sleeve of her house dress, and there on her arm, near the shoulder, was a small birth-mark in the form of a star.

"Yes," she mused, this is all. It is, beyond doubt, a birth-mark, and was of course known to my parents, and to my brothers and sisters, perhaps, if I had any; but so many years have passed that it is useless now as a clew, even had I the means and courage to begin inquiry, and I have neither. Besides, all my relatives may now be dead. Oh! would to God that I had died when this awful change came over me."

The poor creature burst into a flood of tears, and Euphemia clasped her in her arms at once.

So ended the conversation every time the subject was brought up. It was a mystery too deep for penetration.

Sometime later, when the two women were about putting aside their work to retire to bed, there came a half-timid knock at the door.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE GLEAM OF LIGHT.

"Who is there?" asked Euphemia Wiggins, as she stepped to the door to respond to the knock.

"It is I," came the answer, in a woman's voice; "a homeless woman and her child who are seeking shelter for the night. Please let me come in, and then if you do not want me to stay I will go away."

"What shall I do?" Euphemia inquired, turning to her companion.

"I think I would let her come in," Aunt Belinda answered.

"Yes, I will. It may be Providence has directed her footsteps to my door, and I cannot turn her away."

Euphemia opened the door then at once, and a woman stepped in, leading a child—a little girl.

Both were poorly clad. The woman seemed to be about twenty-five years of age, and the child was perhaps about six.

We have seen them before.

The child was the little girl who entered the Everybody's Home to beg, and was there so unpleasantly accosted by Jared Kenneth, and the woman was she who had witnessed it all from the yard behind the hotel.

"Thank you for letting me in," the woman said. "We are very tired, and if you will allow us to sit down I will tell you my story. I assure you I am an honest woman."

"I believe you are," Euphemia answered, "for your face tells me that. Yes, sit down and rest. You look tired."

"And I am tired," was the reply, as the woman sat down and lifted her child to her lap. "I have walked a long distance to-day, and my poor little Bessie here is almost dead, soe is so tired and sleepy."

"Poor child," said Aunt Belinda in sympathy, "she is very tired indeed."

"You are a stranger here, of course," Euphemia remarked.

"Yes, I was never here before."

"How came you to come to my house?"

"I hardly know. It seemed as though my steps were forced this way, and when I saw your face, when you raised the curtain to secure the window a moment ago, it encouraged me to knock. Do you think you can let us stay here all night?"

"Yes, you may stay."

"Oh! thank you—thank you. I would have gone to some hotel, but I am poor, and we are so poorly dressed, too."

"Perhaps they are hungry," Aunt Belinda observed.

"Yes, they must be, to be sure," Euphemia echoed. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No," the woman answered, "we are not hungry. We had something to eat at a little restaurant about an hour ago."

"Then throw aside your wrap, and take off the child's shoes and let her rest her feet. Poor child! you say you have walked a long distance with her?"

"Yes, a long distance."

"And you say you are homeless, too."

"Yes, homeless, and almost friendless."

"Oh, I pity you! Your husband is dead, I suppose."

"No, he is not dead."

"Not dead?"

"No; though he is dead to me."

As she spoke, the woman's face took on an expression of intense hatred, and her eyes flashed.

"I fear I do not understand you," Euphemia said. "Has he then deserted you?"

"Yes, he deserted me, and for five weary years I have been searching for him, but searching in vain until to-day."

"You have found him then?"

"Yes, I have found him at last, and may Heaven help me and keep me from staining my hand with his life's blood!"

"Goodness! you alarm me. I hope you would not commit murder."

"In my right mind, no; but when my eyes rest upon him, I am not myself. All my blood seems turned to fire in my veins, and I love and hate him in the same moment. I love him, because I cannot forget the past when he was all in all to me; I hate him, for the wrong he has done me, and because he loves another."

"Then he is false to you?"

"False! He is as false as perdition. He is even now striving to win the heart and hand of a fair young girl of this town."

"You don't say?" and Euphemia sat bolt upright, her ears standing at attention, all her feminine curiosity aroused to the highest pitch.

And Aunt Belinda, she sat with her eyes fixed upon a spot in the carpet, one of her trance-like dreaming spells rapidly coming over her, which Euphemia was too preoccupied to notice.

"Yes, it is true," the woman assured. "And she, poor child, were better off dead than to be a miserable creature such as I. Oh! I could kill her—kill her!"

"You must not talk like that. You must not add crime to your misfortune."

"No, no, you are right. I must not do that. Heaven help me to resist the temptation. I must not stain my hands with blood, be my name stained as it may."

"Your name is stained? Pardon my curiosity, but you arouse it to the highest point. If the man is your lawful husband, how can your name be stained?"

"Oh! you do not know how greatly he has wronged me. You cannot imagine the cruel position he has placed me in. But I must tell you my story."

"My— First, though, may I lay my little girl there on the settee? She has fallen asleep."

"Certainly, by all means. I did not think of it."

The woman laid her sleeping child down, and then resumed her seat and said:

"My maiden name was Annie Gray. My father was a well-to-do mining speculator of Denver. My mother died when I was but a girl, and my brother, Willis, I have not seen for years. I do not know where he is."

Aunt Belinda was fast passing into her trance-like dream.

"Seven years ago," the woman went on, "I met John Kent, and loved him. He was a handsome man, and was employed in a mine in which my father had a large interest. And he professed to love me, and after a short acquaintance asked me to become his wife. I promised; but when my father heard of it, he forbade the union. Poor father! I wish I had listened to his counsel."

"When my lover learned that my father was opposed to the match, he begged me to marry him in secret. At first I refused; but loving him as I did, I at last consented, and we were married."

"There were no witnesses, and sad to tell, the minister who married us died a few weeks later. But I had my certificate, and with that in my possession I felt no concern for the future, save that I dreaded the day when my secret could no longer be kept from my father."

"And that day came all too soon."

"One night he called me to him, in his private room, and demanded to know the truth. And the truth I told him."

"Where is that certificate?" he fairly thundered in his rage.

"I ran at once to fetch it, but when I reached my room and looked in the little box where I had kept it, it was gone. Then a terrible suspicion flashed upon me, and for a moment my heart stood still."

"My husband, I must explain, had had free though clandestine access to my chamber, entering at night by an unused stair in the rear of the house. I had not seen him for two whole days, and had been in a fever of anxiety concerning him, and when I made the terrible discovery that my certificate of marriage was gone, I feared that he had taken it and had deserted me."

"The next moment I felt my face burn with shame at the mean suspicion, and began to search the room in every part, to see if I had not put the precious paper in some other place."

"But no, it was not to be found, and again the fearful truth began to force itself upon me."

"Well," my father called, after I had been absent a long time, "are you ever coming? If you had a certificate to show me, it would not take you all night to produce it!"

"Weak, frightened, trembling in every limb, I returned to his presence and told him I had lost the paper."

"A likely story!" he cried. "Where is this precious 'husband' of yours?"

"I do not know," I answered. "I have not seen him for two days."

"By whom were you married?" he next demanded.

"I told him."

"And he is dead," he commented, mockingly. "Perhaps, though, there are witnesses to whom you can refer me for proof of what you say?"

"Alas! I had to confess 'there were no witnesses.' And then I fell at my father's feet and begged him to believe me, telling him over and over again that I spoke but the truth."

"Oh! my poor child, I pity you, I pity you," and good-hearted Euphemia could not hold back her tears.

"As for Aunt Belinda, she still sat with her gaze riveted on that one spot in the carpet, silent and motionless. Had the others noticed her they would have seen that her face was pale, and that a death-like dampness was appearing upon her brow."

The narrator paused for a moment to dry her eyes and steady her voice, and then resumed:

"My father listened without a word, though I felt his form tremble with suppressed emotion, heard him sigh as though in mortal pain, and felt his scalding tears drop upon my hands; but when words failed me, and I begged his mercy if nothing more, he sprang up and cried:

"False—false! I do not believe it! You have brought shame upon me, and for it I curse you. Go! I never want to look upon your face again. If there were any truth in what you tell me, you would have some proof, no matter how little;

but you have none. Your story is as false as your heart. To think that you, whom I have loved far more than I love my own life, could sink to such a depth of shame. Go! I disown you! Never let your shadow darken my door!"

"These were the last words I ever heard him utter, and with them he flung open the door and thrust me forth into the world on a stormy night with no friends, no money, nothing save a name of shame."

Again her voice failed her, and she sobbed aloud.

When she could go on, she said:

"No, I never heard my father speak again, for after that night he plunged recklessly into the wildest dissipation, and in less than three months he died."

"I have said that I had no friends, but I had one. There was an old woman who lived a little distance out of the city, for whom I had done many little acts of kindness, and to her I went in my hour of trouble."

"She believed my story, took me in and cared for me, and there my little girl was born."

"For some months I remained there, until after my father's affairs were settled and I had received my portion, and then, after rewarding the good woman who had been so kind to me, I set out with my child in my arms to search for my husband."

Aunt Belinda was now trembling violently, and her eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets. Sitting, as she did, a little in the shadow, she was not noticed, however.

"And have just found him?" Euphemia queried.

"Yes, I have just found him, after so long a time. And now I live only for justice and revenge. Heaven help me to control myself, or I know that I shall kill him before I have forced the truth from him."

"No, no, my child, you must not talk thus. Force the truth from him if you can, but speak not of revenge. Do not add crime to your misfortune. Remember your child."

"You are right. Here, please take this, and put it where I cannot find it if I would." And she drew from her pocket a revolver and handed it to the widow.

Euphemia took the weapon rather warily, and holding it at arm's length, carried it into the kitchen and concealed it. And then as she returned to the room she noticed for the first time that Aunt Belinda had fallen into one of her stupors, and she was startled at the sight, for the woman's face had taken on the same expression of horror and terror which she had seen there once before; and before she could step forward to arouse her, the dreamer sprang to her feet with a piercing scream, and cried:

"Oh! my God! I see it all. It was Delwin Mourtou who—A ah!"

The dream was ended, the dreamer was awake, the spell was broken; and again the mists arose and shut out the past from the poor woman's mental sight, and she fell to the floor in a faint.

"Heavens! what has happened?" cried the newcomer, as she sprang to her side in alarm to assist Euphemia.

"It is nothing," Euphemia answered, though she could not hide her excitement; "she is subject to such spells. Assist me to put her in bed, and then I will tell you her story."

"I trust it was not my own story that caused her alarm."

"No, it was not that. She is subject to those spells."

Euphemia was far from the truth.

In a little while Aunt Belinda was brought to, and all recollection of her dream having vanished, she soon fell asleep.

Then, for a long time, Euphemia and her strange guest sat and exchanged confidences: the former telling her own simple history, and all about Aunt Belinda; and the latter repeating and completing her own sad story.

Strive as they would, though, neither of them could remember the name Aunt Belinda had spoken in the momentary glimpse her mental vision had given her of the past; nor did she herself seem to remember aught of it next day.

CHAPTER XV.

HANS CHAPTER A POINT.

On this afternoon to which we have brought the several parts of our story forward, and when the two newspapers, *The Bow* and *The Arrow*, were published as explained in a previous chapter, each editor sent a copy of his paper across to his rival.

A moment later and they shook their fists at each other vigorously from their office windows.

"Oh! you braying ass!" cried the general, "I'll serve you out for this!"

"Ba-a-h! you whining cur!" retorted the major, "you're a nobody!"

"If I come over there in person," howled the general, "I'll punch your ugly head for you!"

"If you come over here in person, sir, you'll go away in the spirit! Why, sir, if you dare to poke your sneaking nose into this office, I'll pulverize you!"

"I'd like to give you the chance, you grinning

hyena! but I wouldn't disgrace myself by being seen there!"

"That's an easy way out of it, you sneaking, flop-eared cur! I dare you to come, sir; I dare you to come! I dare you to come down to the middle of the street!"

"What! you dare me to come down to the middle of the street! By heavens, sir, after the abuse you have heaped upon me, I'll not stand *that*!" and out and down the stairs the irate editor of *The Arrow* rushed, bareheaded, evidently ready for fight.

When he reached the street, though, his rival was not to be seen, and glancing up at his window he found that he had not moved.

"Oh! you hound!" the general fairly yelled, as he jumped up and down in the middle of the street, shaking both fists wildly at the smiling major, "you coward! you jabbering fool! just come down here! Do come! I beg you to come, and if I don't scour your suspender buttons in the sand! Oh! you poor, miserable, half-fed, creeping louse, you! I wish I could get hold of you!"

Of course a crowd was soon on hand to enjoy the sport, and the rival editors fairly let themselves loose.

"Oh! *won't* you come down here?" the general invited. "Please come! I long to crook my fingers in your scanty locks and snatch you baldheaded! You dared me to come out here, and here I am! Why don't you come and pulverize me? Why don't you come out and walk all over me? Why don't you come and stand on my neck? Oh! but I'd just like to have you do it, you miserable cur! and if I wouldn't climb up your back so quick I'd make your head whirl! Ba-a-h! you groveling plagiarist! I *knew* you were a coward, and now I've proved you one!"

With a parting shake of the fist, then, the general wheeled and returned to his office.

Barely had he disappeared, though, when out rushed the major, bareheaded and excited.

"Where is it?" he screamed, as he danced around and brandished his fists; "where is that thing that called me a plagiarist? By heavens! but I'll cram the lie down his throat! Where are you, you whining cur? Here I am, prepared to annihilate you! Oh! you poor, miserable, sneaking, whining dog! I wish you would show yourself! Tell me where he is! Just let me at him! Let me get just one fair crack at him, and if I don't knock his form into pi in just one brief second, I'll eat my boots!"

By this time the general had reached his room, and stood at the window wiping the perspiration from his face.

"Oh! *there* you are!" yelled the major, as he caught sight of him. "A noble warrior *you* are, ain't you! Why didn't you wait here till I came down? Oh! you coward! I blush with shame for you! If I were such a pale, trembling, wind-broken old fossil as you are, d'ye know what I'd do? I'd go and hire somebody to bury me! You wanted me here so bad, now why don't you come and see me? Why don't you come and climb up my back? Why don't you come and make my head whirl? Ba-a-h! you can't do it! and I dare you to come and try it! Why, you hump-backed, stub-toed, knock-kneed old scare-crow! I'd double you up and tie you into a hard knot so quick you'd forget what your name was! Ba-a-h! why don't you come? You poor, miserable, half-baked fool and liar! why *don't* you come?"

Dancing around excitedly for a moment more, the major dashed back into his office, and in a few seconds was seen at his window.

Then both greeted each other with a cordial shake of the fist, while the crowd cheered and hooted itself hoarse.

"Oh! but I'll write you up for this to-morrow!" cried the major.

"And so will I, you!" yelled the general. "I'll use a scorpion's tail for a pen and a pot of canker venom for ink, and print your history in words of fire!"

"And I'll use the fang of a rattlesnake and the poison of a tarantula for you, and expose your career in words of blood!"

"Ba-a-h!"

"Ba-a-h!"

And both drew back from sight, while the crowd in the street below hooted and cheered like a crowd of madmen, and the sale of an extra large edition of the papers on the morrow was assured.

A quiet observer of all this was Kentucky Jean, and as he sauntered on down the street when the crowd dispersed, he smiled knowingly and muttered:

"A pretty well-played game, I must admit."

Now, as has been explained, these two men were not rivals in business alone, but were also rivals in love, and the object of their devotion was—Euphemia Wiggins.

And they, in turn, had another rival in the person of Hans Keppleheim, the proprietor of "Everybody's Home."

All three of these gentlemen had made several calls at the widow's house, but thus far neither had "come to time" and asked her for her hand.

Nor had any two of them happened to meet at her house.

The two editors were, of course, openly bitter

in denouncing each other, and more than once the widow's name had been spoken in their quarrels. They cared nothing for the public in their bitter attacks upon each other, and certainly cared nothing for their other rival.

Nor did Hans trouble his head about them. He went about with a smile upon his broad face, and had nothing to say. If he truly loved the fair young widow, he evidently felt secure in his position.

When evening came, on this same day of which we write, General Orrion Wade, clad in his best attire, wended his steps toward the home of the fair young widow.

Arriving there, he knocked at the door, which was soon opened by the widow in person.

"Good-evening, General Wade," she greeted him; "pray walk in."

"Good-evening, my dear Mrs. Wiggins," the general responded, and he obeyed the invitation and entered.

The stranger—Mrs. Kent, as she called herself—was still there, her little girl having been taken ill during the previous night. Euphemia had urged her to stay, feeling, as she said, that it was the will of Providence that she should remain as long as she would.

To her the general was introduced, and then a pleasant conversation followed, Euphemia directing it as best she could.

Presently there came another knock at the door.

Euphemia responded again, not a little agitated this time, and there stood Major Theobald Miles.

"G-good-evening, Major Miles," the widow faltered; "will you come in?" and she opened the door wide enough to let him see that General Wade was there.

"Good-evening, my dear Mrs. Wiggins," the major answered. "Yes, by your leave, I will come in."

And he entered.

Euphemia introduced the major to her guest, the strange woman, Mrs. Kent, and then said:

"I suppose it is unnecessary to introduce you two gentlemen to each other. You are both acquainted, I do not doubt."

"Yes, I know him," the major answered.

"And so do I," declared the general.

And then the pair glared at each other for a moment in no very friendly way.

But there was no outbreak, however, and all was going on well when there came yet another knock.

"Who can it be?" the widow muttered, as she rose to answer the summons a third time.

Opening the door, she came face to face with good-natured and smiling Hans Keppleheim.

"Goot-ee-fning, mine tear Mrs. Wiggins," he exclaimed. "How you vas, hey?"

"W-why, Mr. Keppleheim, is it you?" the widow managed to say. "Won't you walk in?"

"You pet my life it's me!" Hans declared, as he entered. And then at sight of his two rivals he stopped short and stood for a moment speechless.

Euphemia introduced him at once, first to her guest, and then to the two journalists.

"Yah, yah," said Hans, "I knows 'em, but I vas surprised dot dey wasn't fighting. Dey vas pooty good sort fellers, but dey vas all de while fighting. Major, how you vas? How you vas Cheneral Wade? Pooty good, hey? I like to hear dot."

Having made himself agreeable in his own way, the worthy Teuton sat down, and then once more the conversation became general.

After a time Hans Keppleheim turned to the two newspaper men, and remarked:

"Say, I s'bose you fellers haf heard de news 'bout de highwaymans, don't it?"

Hans's English was rather rambling at best.

"No; what is it?" they inquired.

"Vhy, two road-agents stopped Charlie Denson dis afternoon when he vas coming from de train, and only fer dot Genducky Chean feller dey would haf robbed him."

"Only for whom?" queried the major.

"Genducky Chean, dot feller dey calls der Youthful Shpord from Yellow Bine. May pe you don't haf seen him already."

"Oh! yes, I know now whom you mean," the major exclaimed. "He was in my office this forenoon. He called to advertise concerning a certain Delwin Mourtou; if I—"

He was interrupted by Aunt Belinda, who sprung to her feet with a slight scream, pressing her hands to her head.

For a moment she stared wildly, and then sunk down again upon her chair. The awakening had been but momentary.

Euphemia was at her side instantly, and assuring the others that it was nothing, that the woman was subject to sudden pains near her heart, she assisted her to her room, while Hans Keppleheim gave the particulars of the adventure he had begun to tell about.

Two things were now known to Euphemia Wiggins. One was, that in Aunt Belinda's past there was concerned a person named Delwin Mourtou—she now recollected the name as the one Aunt Belinda had uttered on the previous night; and the other, that that person was now being inquired for at Bended Bow. And she quietly resolved to know more. She would

learn who it was inquiring for Delwin Mourtou, and then she might be able to gain a clew to Aunt Belinda's past.

Some time after Aunt Belinda had retired, Mrs. Kent retired also, and then Euphemia was left to entertain her callers alone.

The hour had now grown late, and it began to look as though each of her lovers was bound to out-sit the other two. Conversation began to flag, and finally the situation was growing desperate—for the lady, at least when suddenly Hans Keppleheim sprung up, grasped his hat, and exclaimed:

"Chentlemen, when a mans goes to see a vomans, two vas a pully time, don't it?"

His rivals nodded, though they hardly knew what he was talking about.

"Ya, ya, dot vas so; und dree vas a crowd, don't it?"

They saw his point, now, and had to own that he was about right.

"Ya, va, dree vas a pig crowd; but when it comes to four— Vell, four vas a whole houseful, and I guess I peen going pefore it vas preak-fast time."

"Good heavens! is it so late?" exclaimed the two literary gentlemen, as they snatched forth their watches. And then as they laid hold of their hats and canes, and moved toward the door, they each poured forth a volley of excuses for their thoughtlessness in making so long a call.

They did not notice until too late that Hans did not seem to be in so much of a hurry as he had been, and when they said their final "good-night," the smiling German called out:

"Goot-nighd, chentlemen, goot-nighd! I hope you schleep vell." And as they went away, he settled down to enjoy the widow's company for half an hour alone.

There was nothing slow about Hans.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SPORT TO THE RESCUE.

It was Minnie Denson's custom, on nearly every pleasant afternoon, to order the saddle put on a noble-looking black horse which she owned, and go out for a ride.

Sometimes, but not frequently, Blue-eyed Belle would accompany her, on her brother's horse.

When Blue-eyed Belle went away from the Dallas residence, after her interview with Colonel Dallas, Minnie felt a strong desire to take a little exercise, and ordered her horse.

She had invited Belle to accompany her, but owing to Aunt Dinah's precarious condition, it was out of the question, of course, for her to do so.

So Minnie set out alone.

She knew the country well for miles around in every direction, and thought nothing of taking an excursion of eight or ten miles and back.

On this occasion she rode away to the south, passing the Break o' Day Mine, and then turning into a trail leading away to the west, went on and on, paying no heed to time or distance until she noticed the sun was getting low, and then realized how far she had gone.

Instantly she wheeled around and started for home at a lively gait.

For some reason she was nervous and half afraid. Was it woman's natural intuition of impending danger? or was it caused by the adventure her brother had had a few short hours before, and which he had told her about?

Be that as it might, she certainly felt excessively timid, a new experience for her; and made all haste to reach home before dark.

Nothing occurred until she had arrived to within a quarter of a mile of the Break o' Day, and then suddenly three rough-looking men sprung from a clump of bushes by the wayside, seized her horse's bridle and brought her to a stop.

"Hold on a bit, leetle lady," one of them said, "we wants ter make yer 'quaintance."

"You rascal!" Minnie cried, "let go my horse at once!" and as she uttered the words she struck the cowardly footpad a stinging blow across the face with her whip.

"Thunder 'n' lightnin'!" the fellow cried, as he sprung back, clapping his hand to his eyes, "she's half blinded me! Hold fast, Jim, an' I'll have her off o' thar in a jiffy."

Minnie, frightened as she was, plied her whip vigorously, both upon the men and her horse, and the latter, plunging madly, almost broke away once, but did not quite succeed.

They were three against one, and that one a woman.

The struggle was short but decisive, and in a few moments two of the rascals had a firm hold on the horse's head, while the third proceeded to drag the helpless girl from the saddle, having gained possession of her whip.

"Come, ye little fire-cat!" he hissed, "an' I'll pay ye fer th' cuts ye gev me. We'll take some o' th' nonsense out o' ye afore we're done wi' ye, you bet!"

Finding that resistance was useless, and that she was completely in their power, the poor girl had but one resource left—to scream for help.

And scream she did, until the surrounding hills and mountains fairly rung with her cries.

"Hush! blast yer eyes, hush!" her captor cried, or rather hissed, as his fingers closed upon her slender neck. "Stop yer squallin', or by th' Rockies I'll twist yer head off!"

"I want you to release me, sir, and at once!" Minnie gasped, burning with indignation. "Why have you dared to stop me thus. Do you know who I am?"

"No, we don't know who ye are," was the mocking retort, "nor we don't keer very much, neither. As ter why we've dared ter stop ye, we dare do most anything."

"Come, you fellers! give that hoss a crack an' let him go, an' then help me handle this leetle beauty. Lordy! but she's 'most as strong as a man!"

The other roughs obeyed, and the horse bounded away for home at breakneck speed.

"Now jist ketch hold o' th' leetle fairy, an' we'll tote her off."

Despite all her struggles, then, Minnie was presently lifted up, one of the rascals holding his hand over her mouth to prevent any further outcry, and the villains were just on the point of turning aside from the trail when another actor appeared upon the scene.

And that actor was Kentucky Jean.

He had been in the vicinity of the Break o' Day Mine when Minnie uttered her first cry, and had started at once to the rescue.

A strange fellow was this youthful sport. Only one day had he been at Bended Bow, and yet it seemed he knew everybody. He had a way of making acquaintances and friends that was peculiarly his own. And he knew every inch of the town, too, for when he was not in conversation with one citizen or another, he was walking about. Thus it was that just as night was settling down he happened to be in the vicinity of the Break o' Day when Minnie Denson screamed for help.

"There's a woman in danger of some sort," he instantly decided, and away he ran.

In a few moments he was met by the black horse, and a short time later he came upon the scene as described.

"You hounds!" he cried, as he drew a revolver and sprang forward, "release that lady instantly, or die!"

With startled oaths the three rogues turned their heads, and the next instant the sport's fist sent one of them to the earth with stunning force.

"Place the lady upon her feet, instantly!" he commanded, in tones that admitted of no delay, and the other two men obeyed mechanically.

"Are you injured?" Jean then added, as he touched his hat.

"No, but I am frightened almost out of my mind. Oh! sir, how can I thank you for this timely rescue. I— Oh! my God!"

The cry was caused by seeing the man whom the sport had knocked down, suddenly draw a revolver and take hasty aim at the young man's head.

Quick as thought, as quick as the exclamation she uttered, the girl put out her hand and gave Jean a push backward, just at the instant the villain pulled the trigger.

She had saved his life.

The sport felt the wind of the bullet as it passed his face, and ere the man could fire again, threw himself upon him, and with one blow with the butt of his revolver, knocked him senseless.

Brief as was the time spent, it was time lost, and when the sport sprang up he found himself under cover of the weapons of the other two.

"Now, stranger," said one of ruffians, "s'pose we take a deal in th' game. You jist drop that 'ar weepin' o' yours, er else we'll plug ye. D'ye hear our twitter?"

Kentucky Jean let his revolver drop.

"Now, Jim, you jist secure his hands while I hold this weepin' p'inted at his nose."

"All right, pardner, you jist hold him an' I'll soon do fer him."

Thrusting his own revolver back in his belt, the man called Jim drew a strong cord from his pocket and stepped forward.

"Now, ye leetle bantam rooster," he laughed, "I'll tie yer wings so's ye can't fly away. You'll be sorry ye kem i'okin' yer nose inter our affairs, you bet! I—"

Then, with surprising suddenness, he came to a stop.

How it happened, neither he nor his "pardner" were ever able fully to realize.

Like a flash of lightning Kentucky Jean's foot flew up, his toe taking the boastful rascal under the chin, lifting him clear off his feet, and sending him to the ground upon his back; while at the same instant he drew his remaining revolver and fired a snap-shot at the third villain, the bullet breaking his arm.

Once more the youthful sport was master of the situation.

Nor was this all, for Minnie Denson had unnoticed, picked up the weapon dropped by the first of the trio, and now she, too, was on the winning side.

"The man who holds the best hand usually wins the trick," the young sport coolly remarked. "Are you satisfied all around? At any rate I'll take it for granted that you are, and proceed accordingly. Miss, you please let

that fellow with the broken wing have the pleasure of gazing at the muzzle of that revolver you hold, while I attend to these other two, and if he moves, do not hesitate to shoot."

"I will do so," Minnie answered, all her fear now having turned to anger, and she presented the weapon with a coolness that boded ill for the villain if he disobeyed.

With more caution than before, a lack of which had almost cost the sport his life, he set about securing his prisoners.

Taking the cord with which the one he had last knocked down had attempted to bind him, he turned the tables upon the fellow and made him fast in his own web.

Then searching their pockets, he soon found plenty more of the same material, and in short order the three were secured beyond the possibility of escape.

When this was done, then the sport laid hold of them and dragged them a little aside from the trail, leaving the one with the wounded arm in as comfortable a position as the circumstances would admit of.

"Now," he said, turning to the lady once more, "with your permission I will escort you to your destination. I am thankful that I have been able to be of service to you, and I must thank you for saving my life. I was worse than careless."

"And I must again thank you, sir. Yes, you may escort me home, and pray let us hasten. My brother will be greatly alarmed at seeing my horse come home riderless."

"Certainly, we will make all haste. May I offer the support of my arm? the way is very rough."

"Thanks, yes," and Minnie promptly placed her hand upon his proffered arm, and they moved on at a rapid pace.

It was by this time growing dark, though they could still see each other and their immediate surroundings plainly enough, and as Minnie glanced up at the face of her bold rescuer, she presently said:

"You look very much like a friend of mine, a young lady."

"Blue-eyed Belle, as she is called?"

"Yes, her. Do you know her?"

"No, I have never seen her."

"How then did you know whom I meant?"

"I have been told so more than once since my arrival here. I would like to see the lady, and judge for myself."

"You are a stranger here, then?"

"Yes."

"May I inquire your name?" with innocent frankness.

"Certainly you may. My name is Jean Grantley."

"Indeed! then it was you who saved my brother from being robbed by the road-agents this afternoon."

"Are you Charles Denson's sister?"

"Yes; my name is Minnie Denson."

"This is an agreeable surprise, I assure you, for your brother and I have struck up quite a friendly acquaintance."

And so they talked on, until they passed the Break o' Day Mine and were entering the town, when they met Charlie Denson, with three or four others, hastening in the opposite direction.

"Minnie!" the young man exclaimed, the moment he recognized his sister, "thank God, you are safe! And you, my friend," grasping the sport's hand, "Heaven bless you; for I am sure Minnie owes her safety to you. But, sister, tell me what has happened! When your horse came in riderless a minute ago, we were chilled with fear. Did you fall?"

"No," the girl replied, "I did not fall, but I was attacked by three ruffians, and but for this brave gentleman, I dare not think what my fate might have been. We can never repay the debt of gratitude we owe him."

"No, never."

"Let us call it an even exchange of favors," Kentucky Jean supplemented, "for but for your sister's timely interference I would now be lying cold in death."

"Heavens! and she saved your life?"

"Yes; though I deserved to be shot for my carelessness."

Explanations were soon made, and then while Charlie Denson and the men with him went on to bring the three prisoners into town, Kentucky Jean accompanied Miss Denson on to her home, at her request, and when they parted, the youthful sport was cordially invited to make a call, as he promised to do.

Some time later Charlie Denson and his men came in with the prisoners, who were at once lodged in jail, and then Charlie went to the Everybody's Home Hotel to find the sport.

He had decided that Kentucky Jean was just the man he wanted to assist him in solving the mystery of Blue-eyed Belle.

CHAPTER XVII.

KENTUCKY JEAN'S VIEWS.

LATER in the evening Colonel Damon Dallas, Charlie Denson, Kentucky Jean and Rube Rittens were assembled in the library of the Dallas residence, for the purpose of laying plans for the legal warfare they were about entering upon in behalf of Blue-eyed Belle.

Kentucky Jean had modestly acknowledged himself to be something of a detective in an amateur way, when approached by Charlie Denson, and Colonel Dallas and Rube Rittens had readily agreed to Charlie's proposition to engage him.

Little they suspected the double role the sport was playing.

The case was gone over in detail, from first to present, and every point carefully considered, and Kentucky Jean was soon in possession of all the facts.

It was agreed that the first move must be to pay a visit to Dobson & Blake at Denver, in order to learn just how the case stood in regard to Gardner Gernett, and there to take up the trail in search of Belle's supposed parents, Delwin Mourtou and Sibyl Gernett.

These tasks, it was agreed, Charlie Denson and Kentucky Jean should undertake on the morrow.

While the case was still under consideration, there came a gentle knock at the door, and Mrs. Dallas, her daughter Minnie, and Blue-eyed Belle entered the room.

Minnie at once introduced the sport to her mother and Belle.

Now that they were seen together, the resemblance of Kentucky Jean and Blue-eyed Belle was really striking. All present noticed it more than ever. It was passed over, however, with a few casual remarks, for such cases of similitude, though rare, are far from being unknown.

"By the way," remarked the sport, in the course of the ensuing conversation, addressing Blue-eyed Belle, "have you any idea where it was you lost that certificate?"

"No," Belle answered, "or, at least, no definite idea. I know that it was in my possession after I went away from this house, but when I reached home I could not find it. I came back at once as far as the place where I knew I had it, but it could not be found."

"Did you meet any persons on your way home?"

"Yes, quite a number."

"Do you remember who they were?"

"No, I do not remember one of them. My thoughts were busy, and I paid no attention to any one."

"That paper is quite a serious loss, though it can hardly be made of any value to any one else, for you have ample proof that it was in your possession, and how it came there."

"Yes, that is true."

"But without it your own case is made weak."

"Still," said Colonel Dallas, "we can advertise for it, and meanwhile can explain the loss to our lawyers, so that they can be on the lookout for its appearance."

"Yes," the sport agreed, "we can do that."

"And I have no doubt," said Charlie Denson, "that Belle can write out a perfect copy of it from memory."

"Indeed I can," the girl quickly answered, "for I read it over and over so many times that it is fairly photographed upon my brain."

"Then," said Jean, "it will be well for you to do so, so that we can show it to the lawyers to-morrow. If this Gardner Gernett and his lawyers are to oppose us, as we can easily ascertain, we need not let them know how weak our case is. The copy of the certificate will lead them to believe we hold the winning hand. And we do, if we can only supply the few missing links and make our chain complete."

Colonel Dallas set out paper, pen and ink, and Belle sat down at his desk and wrote the copy required.

It was perfect in every particular.

This was given to Charlie Denson.

"What is your idea concerning the mysterious shots that were fired last night, young man?" Colonel Dallas asked, presently.

"I can form no satisfactory idea whatever," the sport answered.

"Do you think they were intentional?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they were both fired by the same person?"

"I know they were."

"How do you know it? Do you, then, know who that person was?"

"I do not know who it was, sir, but I do know that both shots were fired by the same person, and from the same weapon. The last statement I can prove; the first I feel certain of, for the weapon would not be likely to change hands in so short a time, do you think it would?"

"No, it is not likely, but it is possible."

"Well, I will then discard that statement, and simply reduce the assertion to what I can prove; namely, that both bullets came from the same weapon."

"But, in the name of wonders, young man, how can you prove that?"

"Here are the very bullets."

As he answered the question with these words, the sport thrust his hand into his pocket and drew forth two bullets, both of which were more or less battered, evidence of their having been used.

"Do you mean to say these are the bullets that were fired by that would-be murderer last night?" Charlie Denson asked.

"They are the same."

"But," Colonel Dallas insisted, "how came they into your possession? Are you a wizard?" The sport laughed.

"No," he answered, "I cannot lay claim to that distinction. I am, however, as I have been obliged to confess to Mr. Denson here, something of an amateur detective, and—"

"And you are already at work trying to solve the mystery?" cried Minnie.

"Yes. When I heard about it last night at the hotel I wondered over it not a little, and this afternoon, when I read the full accounts of both shootings in the local papers, I wondered still more; and at last I resolved to see what I could learn for myself."

"But, and pardon my interruption," said Colonel Dallas, "how can you tell that these two bullets were formerly alike?" and he rolled them over in his palm and looked at them with a great deal of curiosity.

"That ain't no very hard matter," Rube Rittens declared, "if a man makes a study of sich things."

"That is the explanation," said the sport. "I have paid quite a little attention to the subject, knowing the importance of it in some cases. These bullets, I am satisfied, came from the same firearm." And then he went on and explained to the satisfaction of all upon what grounds he based his theory.

"But," said Minnie, with something of impatience in her tone, though she favored her hero with a winning smile, "pray proceed, and tell us how you found them."

"With pleasure," responded the sport, and he resumed:

"Resolving to investigate the matter a little, I first paid a visit to the doctor who attended the wounded colored woman, and from him obtained the first of the bullets, after quite a little talking, for he seemed loth to part with it. Even as it is, I am under promise to take it back to him, as I certainly shall do."

"What I wanted, you see, was to satisfy myself whether the two shots had been fired by the same person, or by different persons."

"To do this, of course I had to gain possession of the other bullet, and compare the two. If I found them alike, then I should take it for granted that one person had fired both."

"Of course this would not be proof positive; for two persons may carry weapons precisely alike, or one person may carry two weapons of different pattern. Still, the result of my investigation satisfies me that there was but one person in this case."

"Ah! pardon me, Miss Denson, I will come to the explanation at once."

"When I left the doctor's office I went at once to the Break o' Day Mine. There I loitered around for some time, listening to all the idle gossip I could, and finally learned what I wanted to know. Some young man by and by explained to some companions what he knew about the shooting, he evidently having gained his information in like manner; and from him I learned where the mysterious woman had stood when she fired, and the direction of the shot."

"It was your superintendent who discovered the woman stealing out of the yard a few moments after the shot, I believe, Colonel Dallas."

"Yes, it was he. And can you account for her strange and sudden disappearance when he went out to intercept her?"

"I think I can, sir."

"What do you think became of her?"

"My idea is this: She had barely passed out the gate when she heard the office door open, and saw the superintendent hastening along the fence to the corner, and she instantly drew back into the yard again, keeping well in the shadow of one of the posts, and remained there until the man retreated, when she slipped out again and hastened away."

"No doubt you are right."

"Well, to go on, when I had the range of the bullet, I went around to the other side of the office to see whether it had passed through. I found it had not. On looking carefully, however, I was presently rewarded by finding a newly-made crack in one of the boards—a crack that plainly showed how it had been made, and I knew the bullet lay just behind the splinter it had started."

"I went away satisfied for the time being, but after supper at the hotel I returned to the office of the mine, which was then closed, and thrusting my knife into the crack I had discovered I pried the splinter away and the bullet fell out into my hand."

"I had but little time to examine it then, for your cry for help, Miss Denson, came soon afterward. I have examined it since, however, with the result I have explained."

"And still you class yourself an amateur in the detective business, eh?" Charlie Denson exclaimed, interrogatively.

"I cannot class myself a professional."

"Do you intend carrying your investigation any further?" asked Colonel Dallas.

"Yes, if I have time," was the reply. "Since Mr. Denson has done me the honor to engage my services, I must give this case my first attention."

"An' while ye're 'bout it," said Rube Rittens,

"ye might as well take hold o' my case, too, an' give me a lift with it. To tell ye th' truth, I don't believe I'm cut out for a detective."

"What is your case?" the sport asked.

"Why, I wants ter know who it is has been givin' Belle that twenty dollars every month. Find that man, Kentuck, an' my opine is that we kin solve th' hull durn mystery in jest a fraction o' no time."

"And you are right in your opinion, to a great extent. I had not overlooked that point, and it shall come in for a goodly share of consideration."

"That's the idee, every time. Once ye git hold o' him, an' kin make him tell what he knows, th' rest will be easy."

"The hardest part of all, though, may be to get hold of him."

"Yes, no doubt ye're right."

"Do you think your housekeeper can be holding anything back? May she not know who the person is?"

"No, sir-ee! she's told all she knowed, you bet! Why, she was skart out o' her wits, almost, and made a clean breast o' all she knowed, I'm sure."

"Yes, I think daddy is right," Belle added. "Aunt Dinah no doubt told all she knew."

Colonel Dallas had but little to say, though he offered a suggestion now and then. He seemed to be busy with his thoughts, whatever they were; and who could guess them? And Mrs. Dallas said even less than her husband. She was a strange woman, one who seemed to be guided more by fear than by affection in all she did.

The case, as we have said, was gone over in detail, and Kentucky Jean became acquainted with it in every particular, as far as it was known.

At length the conference ended, and the sport took his departure, as did Rube Rittens and Blue-eyed Belle.

On the morrow the ball would be set in motion, and once rolling, it must roll to the level. No power could stop it, nor cover up the truths it was destined to lay bare.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

KENTUCKY JEAN accompanied Rube Rittens and Blue-eyed Belle until they came to the point where they turned aside from the main street, and then went on alone toward the hotel.

The evening was growing late, and nearly all the places of business, except the saloons, were closed.

The sport was walking quite leisurely along, busy with his thoughts, and paid little attention to the persons he met.

Suddenly he was stopped in a most startling manner.

Four men sprung out from behind a pile of empty boxes before a store, and ere the sport could make a move toward defending himself, they were upon him. Taken completely by surprise, he was overpowered in a moment.

Two of the men laid hold of his arms, another instantly wound a heavy cloth around his head and face, while the fourth caught hold of his feet, and lifting him they carried him quickly into a dark alley between the store mentioned and a saloon standing next to it.

The whole time consumed was barely ten seconds.

Half-way down the alley the sport was carried, and then the men entered a door leading into the saloon building.

Here they paused, closing and locking the door behind them.

They were now in a small room, and the darkness was impenetrable.

As soon as the door was secured, though, one of the men struck a match and lighted a candle, and then the cloth was removed from the prisoner's head in order that he might breathe.

"Don't ye open yer yawp-trap, mind ye," one of his captors cautioned, "fer if ye do, our orders is ter blow yer head off, an' by snakes, I'll do it!"

The cool young sport smiled and nodded.

Four more villainous-looking faces it had never been his misfortune to see in company. They were unmistakably cut-throats of the very lowest order.

The room, as stated, was small—uncomfortably so. It was not more than eight feet square. And it was completely void of all furniture.

The floor, the walls, the ceiling were all of boards, roughly painted, and apparently it contained but one door.

All this the sport saw at a glance.

As soon as the door had been secured, the candle lighted and the cloth removed from the sport's head, and he warned to remain silent, one of the four men took hold of a small wire which ran from floor to ceiling in one corner of the strange room, and gave it a slight pull.

Immediately followed the tinkle of a bell in some far-away part of the building.

The moment he had pulled the wire, the man stepped back, and almost instantly that part of the floor disappeared from sight, disclosing a flight of steps leading down to a room below.

Two of the men still had firm hold on Ken-

tucky Jean's arms, while the third held a revolver pointed at his head, and the latter now said:

"Now, my lad, you kin take yer choice; you kin walk down them 'ar steps, or we will pitch ye down head-first. Ye kin do jist as ye please. What d'ye say?"

"Well, if you insist upon my going down," the sport answered, "I prefer to walk."

"All right, go ahead!"

The man who had pulled the wire and rung the bell was the first to step down, and then followed the sport, the two men still holding his arms and rendering him powerless to resist.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs the sport heard the trap-door close again, and then his captors led him forward toward a door.

They had descended into a sort of dismal cellar, where there was no floor save that afforded by the ground.

It was but a short distance from the foot of the steps to the mentioned door, and as soon as he reached it the man ahead gave a light knock.

Instantly the door was opened, and a flood of light poured forth from a room that was like the saloon of some grand palace, in its splendor.

As soon as this door was opened, the man who had knocked for admittance drew back, and then Kentucky Jean was thrust forward and released, and the door swung shut behind him.

He was free, so far as the use of his limbs was concerned.

Instantly his hand dropped to the handle of one of his ever-ready revolvers, and he glared around.

He was completely alone.

He strode forward to the middle of the room and looked, but no one was there.

And the door by which he had entered—where was it? Not a sign of it was to be seen.

And yet it did exist, and he was made aware of it not by hearsay, but by the actual evidence of sight; and seeing is believing.

Overhead could be heard the noise of the saloon, and the cracked voice of some miner who was singing to the still more cracked and wheezy tones of an accordion.

The sport knew where he was, too; that is to say—he knew what saloon was over him.

He had posted himself pretty thoroughly since his coming to town, and remembered its name.

It was known as the "Enchanted Hall," and he remembered seeing its illuminated sign just a moment previously to his being set upon by the four men.

But the room he was in—there he was puzzled.

He doubted whether there was a parlor in the town that could equal it, or in Denver even, for that matter.

The floor was covered with the richest of velvet carpet; the walls were gilded and bronzed, and shone resplendent with heavy mirrors, while magnificent paintings hung here and there. The furniture was of ebony and silk plush; heavy curtains draped in rich folds before pretended windows; a massive table stood in the center of the room, on which lay books upon books, chiefly of poetry and music; a piano was there, and also a harp and a guitar.

The sport tried to recall all that he had heard concerning this saloon—the "Enchanted Hall." He had stepped in there that afternoon for a few moments, and had noticed over the entrance what he had supposed was a balcony for musicians. It was draped heavily with silk curtains.

Now he understood its purpose. It was but a sham—an imitation of a balcony, and served to conceal the true source of the music when the piano—or the other instruments—was played in this gorgeous room in which he now stood.

The sport, always cool and possessed, could but stare around him in wonderment.

Of all the adventures he had ever had, this one stood at the head.

While he stood thus, wondering why he had been forcibly brought there, and what would happen next, he suddenly caught the reflection of some one in one of the mirrors.

He turned instantly, revolver in hand.

Before him stood a woman.

"Pray do not shoot me," she said, in low and musical tones; "no harm is intended to you."

The woman advanced as far as the table as she spoke.

"I will take your word for it," responded the sport, touching his hat, and he replaced the weapon.

Well he knew that if immediate harm had been intended him, he would have been disarmed and bound when the four men held him in their power.

The woman was of medium bight, finely formed, and was clad in a close-fitting robe of black velvet.

Over her face she wore a silken mask.

"Please to be seated," she invited.

Kentucky Jean sat down, and then remarked:

"You have a decidedly original way of bringing a person into your presence, madam."

The woman laughed.

"You," she answered, "are the first person, besides myself and my servants, who has ever entered this room. You are a stranger at Bended Bow, are you not?"

"I am."

"Then I will tell you that this room under the Enchanted Hall Saloon is a secret, and that few know of its existence. Those few are the men who built the house for me, and they came from New York to do the work, returning there when it was completed."

"If that is the case, madam, I cannot understand why you have revealed the secret to me. How do you know but that I will make it known the moment I get out of here?"

"I have no fear of that, sir. When you leave here, it will be after you have sworn not to make known what you have seen."

"And suppose I refuse to make any such promise?"

"Then you shall die."

"You would kill me, then?"

"I would."

"Perhaps you forget that I am armed, madam, and would make a desperate resistance."

"Bah! look around you. One motion of my finger would hurl you into the next world."

The sport looked, and instantly realized how completely he was in the strange woman's power.

Behind him stood four men, all clad in long, black robes, with masks of black over their faces, and in the hands of each were a pair of heavy revolvers.

"Well, what do you think?" the woman asked.

"For the present," Jean answered, "I am in your power."

"It is so. And now, perhaps, you will be more kindly disposed to listen to my terms."

"I am perfectly willing to listen."

"Very well."

With a wave of her hand, then, toward the four masked men, she caused them to disappear as though by magic.

"Do not imagine they are gone," the woman warned. "They have merely stepped out of sight behind those revolving mirrors, and their revolvers still cover you."

"Can you not relieve me of their surveillance?" Jean asked.

"Why?"

"Because I do not feel at my ease with the knowledge that unseen weapons are aimed at me."

"You mean to ask if I am afraid to trust you. See," and as she spoke she placed her finger upon a tiny silver bell on the table before her and gave one tap.

Instantly the revolving mirrors turned again, and the four black-robed men appeared in sight, standing like statues, their weapons held as steady as though held in hands of iron.

"Attention!" the woman ordered. "Advance, lay your weapons here upon the table, and retire. I shall not need you again to-night."

Silently the men obeyed.

They strode forward, laid their revolvers down upon the table, and stepped back to their places.

Then again the mirrors turned, carrying the men with them on the parts of the floor on which they separately stood, which were circular pieces of marble; and in a moment they were gone.

Kentucky Jean was about to speak, but the mysterious woman cut him short with a motion to remain silent and listen.

The sport obeyed.

In a few moments heavy steps were plainly heard ascending the stairs in the adjoining room—or the cellar, as we have called it, and then came the tinkle of a bell under the table.

"My men have ascended the stairs," the woman announced, "and now ring for me to open the trap-door," and as she spoke she reached under the table and moved a lever there concealed.

Immediately the steps were heard again, then again came the sound of the little bell beneath the table, and the woman pushed the unseen lever back to its former position.

Soon after a distant door was heard to close.

"Now," said the woman, "I am alone with you. You are armed, I am not. I am in your power."

CHAPTER XIX.

A STARTLING DECLARATION.

THE youthful sport was surprised in no small degree.

His life, from boyhood, had been one of wild adventure, but this experience surpassed all previous once in strangeness.

Who could this mysterious woman be?

As he thought it all over he remembered that on the previous night at the Everybody's Home he had overheard some young men in conversation, and heard mention made of a woman whom they called "Incognita, the Faro Queen."

Could this woman be she?

He believed it was.

He had not overheard enough of the conversation to learn where she held forth, and in fact had paid but little attention.

Now he was interested.

"No, madam," he made reply, "I am not the one who holds the vantage hand at present; it is you."

"How is that? I confess I do not see your meaning. Have I not just said that you are armed and I am not? and that for this reason I am in your power. Is it not so?"

"It is not!"

"And why?"

"Because I do not believe you have done all that appearances would indicate. You are surrounded with so much mystery here that I cannot believe but that my life is at this moment in your hands."

"And you think my sending my servants away was only done for effect?"

"Precisely."

"It is not so. I am entirely alone in your company now. No one of my men is near enough to render me immediate assistance if I was to summon. I am in your power."

"Well, I will believe you."

"It is so, and—Hold, I will prove it to you. You are armed, you say?"

"I am, as you have seen."

"Produce one of your weapons—a revolver."

"Very well," as he drew one of his revolvers and cocked it, "here it is."

The woman rose from her chair and stood erect, saying:

"Take aim at my heart."

The sport obeyed.

"And now," she added, "if you will you may fire. I am in your power."

Kentucky Jean instantly resolved to test her nerve.

"Very well," he said, "I will do so," taking out his watch; "I will give you just one minute for prayer, and then you die."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do, unless before that minute is up you recall your words. Once you are removed, my way out of here will be assured."

"Do not be too certain of that."

"Why?"

"Because there is not a door in this room that you or any other person, save myself, can open." "Ah! did I not say I believed I was still in your power?"

"I did not speak with that meaning."

"How, then?"

"I meant simply that you held my life in your hands, as you certainly do. Is that minute near up?"

"I am not counting the seconds yet."

"Why not?"

"Our conversation has distracted my attention from it. I will begin now."

"One moment, first."

"Well?"

"I will show you how to get out."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will. Come here—keep me under cover at the same time, and I will put means of escape into your hands."

The sport obeyed to the letter, keeping the woman covered with his revolver and passing around to her side of the table.

"You see this lever," she asked, as she laid her hand upon what seemed to be a part of the ornamental work of the table.

"Yes, I see it."

"It opens the trap-door at the head of the stairs, thus," and pulling it, she declared that the door was open.

Putting the lever back in its place, she next placed her finger upon a little knob on the side of the table.

"This," she said, "will open the way to the stairs, simply by pressing upon it."

Suiting action to her words, she pressed the knob, and instantly a door opened upon the black and dismal cellar.

"And will you allow me to go now?"

"No," as she closed the door "not unless you go by force. You must first kill me, or render me helpless to resist your going."

"You are a strange woman."

"So I have been told before."

"Let me recall some of the incidents of the past few moments."

"Do so."

"In the first place I am set upon in the street by four most villainous-looking rascals, made a prisoner and carried into this building."

"Such were my orders."

"And allow me to remark by the way that your men have the appearance of cut-throats of the meanest type."

"I am aware of it."

"Well, I am carried into this building, as I say, and there I am informed that if I open my mouth I will be instantly shot, according to orders."

"What? Was your life threatened?"

"It was."

"I gave no such orders. I ordered you to be brought here and placed in this room, free and unharmed. I fancy my men have introduced that little by-play to enhance their own safety."

"It may be."

"You do not doubt that I am telling you the truth?"

"I do not."

"I assure you it is true; I ordered them not to harm you in any way."

"I believe you. But, when I found myself in your presence you assured me that no harm was intended me then."

"Well, does that not accord with my orders to my men?"

"Hardly."

"And why?"

"Because you have since threatened my life."

"I have threatened your life!"

"You certainly have."

"I do not remember it."

"Did you not tell me I could not leave here until I had sworn to keep secret all I have seen?"

"Yes, I said that."

"And you added that if I refused to make that promise, then you would kill me."

"Now I remember."

"And do you still mean it?"

"The tables are now turned. You were in my power then; now I am in yours."

"You allowed them to turn willingly."

"I am aware of it."

"Why did you allow it?"

"You may learn that later on. Understand me, I say you *may* learn it later on. I do not know that you will."

"Well, it does not greatly matter. I am in haste, and since you will not allow me to go willingly, but invite me to remove you from my path with a bullet, I must do the latter. Are you ready?"

"I am."

As she answered, the woman drew a watch, sprung open the case, and fixed her eyes upon it.

"Let me know when you begin to count the time," she added.

"I will do so. Before I begin, however, let me warn you that I mean what I say. At the end of one minute, unless you signal me not to do so, which will also signal your consent that I am to go free at once, I shall fire, and fire to kill. Do you understand this?"

"I do."

"Very well, it is understood. Now I shall begin to count the seconds. Now."

Then followed one minute of perfect silence.

The woman did not move a muscle, but stood and gazed fixedly at the time-piece she held in her hand.

The minute passed, and then passed one, two, three, five, ten seconds over.

At the end of that time Kentucky Jean closed his watch, and placed his revolver back in his belt.

The woman closed hers and looked up.

"Are you satisfied with the test?" she inquired.

"What test?" the sport demanded.

He was not a little nettled to find he had not been able to make the woman quail in the face of her threatened danger.

"Why, the test you have just given to my nerves. Did I show signs of fear?"

"Outwardly you did not. I could not see your face."

"I can assure you my face remained as passive as the mask I wear over it."

"Will you not remove your mask?"

"We will speak of that later. You have not answered my question."

"Whether I am satisfied with the test?"

"Yes."

"I am not."

"You are not! Why?"

"Because I do not believe you thought I would shoot."

The woman laughed merrily.

"You are right," she confessed. "I *knew* you would not shoot."

"You *knew* I would not! How could you be sure what I would do?"

"Oh! I could not be positive, of course; but I trusted you. You stood well the test."

Kentucky Jean was baffled and nonplused.

"I stood well the test," he repeated; "what do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You had it in your power to take my life, and I invited you to do so. That I knew you would not do. You are no murderer. You might, however, have struck me to the floor insensible, and then made good your escape. You have proved yourself a man—a man of honor."

"Thank you, but is there not yet time for me to do the latter?"

"There is not. Once more you are in my power."

The woman had moved away to a chair a little distance from where she had been standing, and was again seated.

"I am again in your power, you say?" the sport questioned. "If that is so, I have not been out of it, and you are plainly guilty of falsehood. You could afford to test me, as you claim you have done."

"You wrong me, sir," the woman declared. "I was in your power, wholly and completely. Standing where I did, you had me at your

mercy; but seated here, I have you at mine. Look above you."

The sport did so, and to his surprise and almost horror beheld a heavy sword hanging point downward directly over his head.

He, too, had resumed his seat.

"Heavens!" the sport ejaculated involuntarily, and he essayed to spring to his feet, but did not succeed in doing so.

To his great surprise he found himself a prisoner in the chair, two strong steel arms having slipped around him, one around his waist and the other over his lap.

He had not noticed them, as they did not touch him when he sat still, but they held him firmly to the chair.

"What think you now?" the woman asked.

"Are you human? or are you in league with the Evil One?"

"I am human, like you."

"Well, let us have no more of this nonsense. Come at once to business. Why have you brought me here? and what do you want?"

"I want to talk with you."

"Well, I am willing. First, though, remove these cursed springs from around me."

"That I will do. I only wanted to show you my power. I think we understand each other now."

"I think we do, Madame Incognita."

"Ha!" the woman exclaimed, "you know who I am?"

The sport wanted to satisfy himself as to whether this was or was not the famed Faro Queen he had heard spoken of.

He now knew it was she.

"Yes," he answered, "I know; you are Incognita, the Faro Queen."

"I thought you did not know me. But, I cannot wonder that you do, for I am too well known in that character to remain long unknown to a stranger."

"Well, release me. I do not care to stay here beneath that sword. It may fall, though through no intention on your part."

"No, it cannot fall unless I release it. But, there you are, free again."

The sport arose, shook himself, though he could not have told why; and then strode up and down the room several times.

Presently he paused opposite to where the woman sat, and said:

"Madam Incognita, I have asked you to favor me with a sight of your face. Will you oblige me?"

"No man in this city has yet seen my face, sir."

"The greater the favor I ask, then. You also say no man before me has ever entered this room. Why am I the favored one? Not because you are friendly inclined toward me. I am certain."

"You mistake."

"Do I?"

"You do. It is more than a friendly interest that has led me to bring you to me."

"What, then, is the interest you have in me?"

"I have brought you to me because—because I love you."

CHAPTER XX.

THE FARO QUEEN'S STORY.

KENTUCKY JEAN now began to believe the woman insane.

In what other way could he account for her strange doings and sayings?—not the least strange of which was her startling declaration that she loved him.

He resolved to know more about her.

How was he to learn more concerning her, however, unless she chose to reveal it?

He felt that thus far all had gone in her favor, and would it not continue to go so?

"Madam," he presently said, "the declaration you make is a surprising one. I am not aware that I have ever seen you before."

"I do not think you ever have, sir, unless you have visited the faro room of this saloon, and seen me at my bank."

"And I have never had that honor."

"Then you have never before seen me, I think. You may have noticed me in the bar-room of the Everybody's Home last evening, however; but as I was in disguise then, of course that would not count."

"You were there last night?"

"I was."

"And you saw me?"

"I did."

"Strange; I do not remember seeing a woman there."

"Not strange at all, sir. I was clad in male attire."

"Oh! I see. And may I ask where you had seen me before that?"

"I had never seen you before then."

"How can it be, then? You certainly did not learn to love me so suddenly."

"Yes, I did. My love for you was born in a moment."

"Madam, you puzzle me. You are a mystery to me."

"I am a mystery to all men. To you, however, I intend to reveal myself."

"Do you mean what you say?"

"I do."

"And when do you intend doing it?"

"Now—at once, if you can answer to my satisfaction a few questions I desire to ask."

"Ask them."

"Are you a married man?"

"I am not."

"How old are you?"

"I cannot answer that with any degree of certainty. I am between eighteen and twenty, I think."

"What! do you not know your age?"

"I do not."

"How do you explain that?"

"Easily enough. I do not remember my parents, and have no record of my birth."

"Indeed! But have you no relatives who can inform you?"

"I have no relatives, so far as I know. But your questions are becoming rather personal, are they not?"

"No doubt they are, as I intend them to be."

"Have you any more to ask?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me hear them. I will answer them or not, as I think fit."

"Pray do not be angry with me. You cannot blame me for making some inquiries concerning you, when I tell you that I intend to ask you to marry me, can you?"

"You intend to ask me to marry you? Good Heavens! are you mad?"

"I am no more mad than you."

"Call it what you will, you are not in your right state of mind. You must be insane."

"No more so than you. Because a man loves a woman and asks her to become his wife, should he be called insane? Why, then, if a woman asks a man to become her husband, should she be considered out of her mind? It is a poor rule that will not work both ways."

"But, madam, such a thing is unheard of."

"True, and more's the pity."

"But, madam, you are surely not in earnest."

"I was never more in earnest in my life."

"You do not consider that I know nothing whatever about you—who you are, what you are—or that I have never even seen your face?"

"See it now."

As she uttered the words, the woman raised her hand and pulled aside the mask she wore.

The sport started back a step in surprise.

A more beautiful face his eyes had never rested upon.

To describe it is unnecessary. Suffice it to say the woman was handsome, and apparently not over twenty-two years of age.

"You have no fault to find with my appearance?" she queried, after a moment of silence.

"Not the least," the sport responded.

"My face is fair?"

"It is exceeding fair. You are a beautiful woman."

"No, I am not beautiful. I know my own appearance. I am good-looking, but not beautiful. And the reason I call attention to my appearance is this: I assure you—and I want you to believe me—that my soul is as fair as my face."

"I believe you. Will you tell me your history?"

"I will. After the declaration I have made to you, and the great favor I have asked, I am bound to do so. Listen:

"My name is Amabel Erving. I am now twenty-two years of age. I was born in the city of New York. I may have relatives there, but if so, I know nothing of them nor they of me. I am an orphan."

"When I was a child my parents moved to the West and settled at Denver. A year later my mother died, and some three or four years after that my poor father was foully murdered."

"Murdered!"

"Yes, murdered. He was a lawyer, and had an office in that city—Denver. He had a housekeeper, who took charge and care of me, though I spent a great deal of my time in my father's office. One morning I went to his office as usual, and found him lying upon the floor, with a cruel knife buried in his breast, dying."

"How old were you then?"

"Between eight and nine."

"Go on."

"With a scream I threw myself upon my knees beside him, and clasped his hand, begging him to speak to me and tell me what to do. I think he had fainted, for he did not move or speak for some moments."

"Presently, though, he opened his eyes, and the moment he saw me he said:

"'Ama, thank God you have come. I have been praying for you to come. I want you to avenge my death.'

"He was almost gone, and I had to pay the closest attention to catch his words."

"'I have been foully murdered,' he said, 'and you must be the one to bring the murderer to justice. His name is—' and he whispered a name distinctly with his dying breath."

"And that name?"

"That name was—'Delwin Mourton.'"

"Good heavens! Delwin Mourton a murderer!" the astounded sport exclaimed, his thoughts flashing instantly to Blue-eyed Belle,

whose father Delwin Mourton was supposed to be.

"My God! you do not know him?" the young woman cried, instantly.

"No, I do not."

"But you know of him?"

"I know nothing of him."

"Why then your exclamation? You have at least heard of him."

"Yes, and I am looking for him. But I will tell you more presently. Go on with your story."

"Well, as soon as my father was dead I ran to the street and called for help, and told my story. But, strive as I would, I could not recall the name of his murderer."

"You could not remember it?"

"No; it had slipped from my mind."

"But it came back to you eventually?"

"Never. Awake and asleep, day after day, year after year, the haunting question ever on my mind was—'What was that name?'"

"And when did you recall it for the first time, and how was it brought to your mind?"

"I never learned it again until yesterday, when I happened to see it in an advertisement in the papers."

Kentucky Jean was more than interested.

"You do not know why Delwin Mourton killed your father, do you?"

"I do not."

"And no papers were found in his office to throw suspicion upon any one?"

"No, none whatever. It was believed that the murderer robbed him of many papers at the time of the crime."

"Very likely. But, go on. I am bound to interrupt you, it seems."

"Some time after my father's death our housekeeper married. Her husband was a professional gambler. With them I visited almost most every city in the land, and thus learned what I know of the black art. A few years ago, by an accident on the Mississippi, they were both killed. By the gambler's will I received a fortune of nearly one hundred thousand dollars, besides some property here at Bended Bow. I came here, and here I resolved to locate. You see the result of that resolve."

"But, your education?" the sport queried, with a glance at the volumes on the table.

"The gambler of whom I speak and his wife were both educated, and the little I know they taught me."

"And the regard you confess for me—"

"My love for you was born in a moment. I have had many offers of marriage, all of which I have refused. Some I refused because the offerer was unworthy of any pure woman; and all, because I did not love. I felt no more interest in one man than in another, and little in any; and I resolved that I would never marry until I could give my heart as well as my hand. More, I vowed to reverse the order of things, and be the one to choose, instead of waiting to be chosen. If I ever found my heart being drawn to any man, and there proved to be no barrier in the way, I determined that I would ask him to accept me for his wife."

"With this resolve in mind, I have led a pure and sinless life. In public I am Incognita, the Faro Queen—a woman whose face has never been revealed; in private, and you are the first to know me in private, I am Amabel Erving."

"And you are in earnest in asking me to marry you?"

"I am in earnest. Can you not believe me?"

"Do you know my name?"

"Yes, it is Jean Grantley."

"How did you learn it?"

"I saw it on the register at the hotel."

"Did it not strike you that it might be an assumed name?"

"Heavens! I had not thought of that. But I don't believe it is."

"Well, it is not. It is all the name I know, and I suppose it is my true name. But, you did not finish what you were saying."

"In regard to how and why my heart has turned to you in love?"

"Yes."

"I was at the hotel last night, as I have said. I saw you when you arrived, and at once I felt an unusual interest in you. I remained to see more of you. When you came into the bar-room again, after supper, my interest turned to admiration; and when, a few moments later, you crossed the room to protect that little girl from Jared Kenneth's harsh questions, knocking him down as you did when he insulted you, my whole being went out to you in love."

"Oh! if I could but tell you in words how much I love!" and as she uttered the exclamation she threw herself upon the floor on her knees, and clasped the sport's hand in hers, kissing it passionately.

Lifting her up, Jean led her to a sofa and sat down beside her, still allowing her to retain hold of his hand.

He saw that she was thoroughly in earnest, and he believed her story.

He no longer considered her insane.

But to love her—Ah! If this had happened on the previous night, before he had met Minnie Denson, then—But, he had met Minnie Denson, and he loved her.

"Oh! what do you think of me—what *can* you think of me?" the pretty Faro Queen sobbed, now bursting into tears. "I have often asked myself if I was like other women; whether I was not some unnatural creature without heart or soul; whether the power to feel affection for any one had been denied me. Now I know. The question is answered. I *am* like other women, and now I wonder how this exquisite passion has remained dormant so long.

"Oh! tell me that you love me in return, that you will crown my happiness, or I shall go mad—mad!"

When the reader has reached the end of our romance he will be able to appreciate what a delicate play our hero had to make at this point.

He could not promise what the woman asked, he could not deny her; he must retain her regard, and yet he must put her off.

At first it seemed no easy task, but she soon opened the way herself.

"Why do you not reply?" she asked. "Do you not care for me, then? But, I almost forget that I am a stranger to you; it seems that I have known you for years. Of course I cannot expect you to love me at once; I must give you time. Take a week, two, a month if you will, and then give me the answer. Meanwhile, though, you must come here and spend some time in my society every day. Will you do this?"

"I will," the sport replied. "I see you are in earnest, and I shall make no jest of your confidence. One month from this night I will give you my answer, and in the mean time I will see you as often as I can. I have business to attend to however, and cannot promise you when I shall see you again. To-morrow I must go to Denver."

"You give me your word of honor that you will do as you promise?"

"I do."

"Very well, I know I may trust you. One month from to-night I shall have your answer, and heaven help me if it be 'no'."

CHAPTER XXI.

A LIVELY FIGHT.

FOR some moments silence reigned.

The sport was the first to break it.

"Miss Erving," he said, "I have told you that I believe your story in every particular. Now I would like to ask you a few questions."

"Very well, you may do so."

"In the first place, do you not think you are unwise in the step you have taken?"

"In confessing my love and asking you to reward me with yours?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I have acted unwisely?"

"I do. You know nothing whatever about me, whether I am an honest man or a rascal, and yet you would place your future in my hands."

"You mistake, sir."

"How do I mistake?"

"In saying I do not know your character. That one incident at the hotel last night revealed your character to me."

"Well, I hope I am half as good as you believe me to be, anyhow. Still you have not inquired concerning my business or profession, nor concerning my worldly possessions. You seem to take it for granted that I am able to support a wife."

"I never gave it even a thought. I have plenty for both of us."

"And you would support me?"

"Yes, and gladly."

"Well, allow me to say right here that when I marry I shall be the one to do the providing; not my wife."

"I admire the resolution. Still, I must tell you that when I marry I shall surrender all my wealth to my husband, and it shall be his."

"If he will accept it. But there is no need for us to discuss this matter now. If you are willing, I should like to go. The hour is late."

"Yes, you are right. Since you have said you will not betray my confidence in any way, which includes that you will keep secret what you have seen here, you may go."

The sport smiled. The woman had carried her point. She had declared that he should not leave her presence until he had promised not to reveal what he had seen, and he had, as it were, tacitly agreed to her terms.

"Before we part, though," he said, "I would like to ask one more question, one that I cannot answer myself to my satisfaction."

"What is it?"

"It is this: After hearing your strange story, I wonder more than ever at your having in your service four such ill-favored brute as the four who attacked me and brought me to your presence."

"I do not wonder that you ask. They certainly are not by any means prepossessing to favor in appearance. They are a rough set, and are none too honest, but they are in my power, and I can trust them. I once saved their miserable lives, and they are as grateful as faithful dogs."

"But are you not afraid they may some time betray you, or do you harm?"

"I am not. They are in awe of me, and are the best protectors I could have."

"Well, you know them better than I, of course. I would not trust them out of my sight. And, I want to warn you that if you desire to keep them in good health, do not set them upon me again. I may not be so easily taken another time."

"It will not be necessary."

"How came they to know I would happen along at the hour I did?"

"They had shadowed you."

"So I imagined. It was a poor beginning for you to make, if you hoped to win my regard. But we will overlook it now. Your threat to kill me was, I suppose, not made in earnest."

"Heavens! no. Could I kill one whom I love? Do you suppose I could, or would, stain my hands with blood?"

"I do not think you would. And when you said that I might, but you could not say that I would, learn why you had brought me here, and why you put yourself in my power as you did, you meant that my answer to your questions would decide it."

"Exactly. Had I found an insurmountable barrier between us, then you would not have heard my story, nor learned my secret."

"And you would then have allowed me to depart?"

"Yes, on your promising not to reveal what you had seen."

"And refusing to promise?"

"That point is passed and settled. You have promised. Had you not— But, you would have done so."

Again the sport smiled.

"Well," he said, "with your permission I am now ready to go."

"Very well, I will conduct you out," as she rose and replaced her mask. "When shall I see you again?"

"I cannot say. Possibly to-morrow night, or on the following day."

"You will be welcome."

And so the remarkably strange interview ended.

Kentucky Jean was well pleased that the woman had not referred again to his own past, asking further questions, and also that she had not questioned further in regard to why he was searching for the man who had murdered her father.

These points he was glad to escape.

Being ready to conduct her guest out, the Faro Queen opened a door, which one of the revolving mirrors disclosed, and bade him follow her.

He obeyed, and they passed from the room.

Turning the mirror back into place again, and closing the door, Incognita bade the sport advance up a flight of stairs which lay before them, and she followed.

At the top of the stairs was a long, narrow passage, dimly lighted.

As soon as she reached the top, Incognita again took the lead, saying:

"Follow as silently as possible, and do not be surprised at something I shall presently show you."

The sport nodded, and they proceeded.

When they came near the end of the passage the woman stopped, with a motion to the sport to do the same.

Turning to the wall on her left, then, she raised a small slide from before a very small, round hole, and peered through.

Evidently satisfied with what she saw, she drew back and whispered:

"Look, and do not be surprised."

The sport obeyed.

Placing his eye to the hole, he looked through. He beheld a large, well-furnished room, and on the opposite side was a big, green-covered table, on which was a faro lay-out.

Standing and seated around the table were a number of men, old and young, and on the opposite side of it, with face toward him, sat a woman, the very counterpart of the one who stood beside him.

This woman was masked, and was the person who was conducting the game.

Kentucky Jean was surprised in spite of himself, and turned quickly to Incognita for an explanation.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Does she look like me?" the Queen questioned.

"Yes. Masked as she is, she is as like you as would be your reflection in a mirror."

"And had you entered that room ten minutes after leaving me, you would have believed it to be me you would see?"

"I certainly would. Who is the woman at the table now?"

"Those around her take her to be Incognita, the Faro Queen; but they are mistaken. She is my double."

"Your double?"

"Yes."

"Explain what you mean. What new mystery is this?"

"I will do so. That woman is a mulatto, about my own age. I made her acquaintance in New Orleans, and engaged her to be my maid and companion. I taught her how to manage

the game, and whenever I want to absent myself from the table, she fills my place. We dress precisely alike—dress, gloves, mask and all; and at the table no one could detect the trick. I have let you into the secret in order that you may be on your guard, so that you may know that you cannot be certain whether it is I or my double at the bank, should you enter the room when the game is going on."

"Thank you."

"See," after a glance into the room, "it is near midnight, and the bank is now about to close. I close the game precisely at twelve o'clock. Come on, and I will conduct you out."

The sport was not at all averse to going, and followed the woman to the end of the passage, where she unlocked a door.

"Here," she said, "I will bid you good-night. When I open this door you will see a set of steps leading to the ground. Go down them, turn to your left and proceed to the corner, and there turn to the left again and proceed, and you will come out upon the street through the same alley by which you were carried in."

"I can easily find the way."

"Yes, you cannot mistake it. And now, good-night!" and giving the young man's hand a fond, firm pressure, she opened the door for him and he passed out, after returning the "good-night."

He followed her directions, and had no trouble in reaching the street, and then hastened on toward the hotel.

If his mind had been busy with his thoughts when he parted from Rube Rittens and Blue-eyed Belle an hour before, it was now more busy still.

The adventure through which he had just passed seemed like a dream.

He could hardly realize that it had not been such, so startling, strange and unusual had been the events.

But it was no dream, as he well knew when he went over all that had been said, and recalled the story of the mysterious Incognita, the Faro Queen.

His mind was busy indeed.

Playing a double role, as we have before hinted, he had no ordinary task in hand.

Little he dreamed of the terrible revelations that were to come.

His thoughts centered chiefly upon Blue-eyed Belle and Charlie Denson, and from them wandered to the other actors in the drama in which he was playing a part.

He had already learned something concerning Delwin Mourtou—learned that he had been a murderer, and him Blue-eyed Belle believed to be her father.

If such proved to be the fact—that he *was* her father, what a terrible revelation there was in store for her.

And through him the fact would be made known.

Then he thought of the strange Amabel Erving, or "Incognita," and of her strange request, and the fair face of Minnie Denson came before him at once, and he saw how impossible it would be for him to give his heart to another.

How events would terminate he could not guess.

Just as he reached the hotel, and was about to enter, two men came out and descended the steps.

He recognized them at once as Jared Kenneth and Willis Stanton.

Kenneth, he noticed, was not as sober as he might have been.

The sport stepped aside to avoid them, but Kenneth saw him, and with an oath, turned and aimed a blow at him with his fist.

Jean avoided it with ease, and tried to get by, but Kenneth blocked his way, and exclaimed:

"We'll square our account now, my pretty boy! I'm goin' ter settle with you for that blow last night!" and once more he tried to strike the sport in the face.

Again the blow was easily parried, and addressing Stanton, Jean said:

"Please keep your friend away from me, and allow me to pass. I do not want to be compelled to knock him down."

"I don't believe you *can* knock him down," Stanton declared. "You took him half-foul last night, and if he lays you out for it now, it will serve you right."

"Course it will!" cried Kenneth, "and that is just what I intend to do. I'll lay him out so that he will remember me, you bet!" and he struggled to strike the young sport as he spoke.

Jean still beat him off without striking him, and kept warning him to desist.

Hearing the high words, all who were in the bar-room rushed out, and the situation explained itself at once.

"Keep away, I tell you," the sport cried, "or I will strike you!"

"You can't do it!" Kenneth shouted, as he made another dash, "you can't do it!"

"I'll show you, you fool! if you don't stop and go on about your business," the sport warned again, now losing all patience. "I will knock you silly if you crowd me."

"And if you do," put in Stanton, "you will have to tackle me!"

"D'ye hear that?" cried Kenneth, "we're going to dress you up in style! Come on, now, and take your dose!"

"Well, if you will have it, take it!" and with the words Jean's fist shot out and Jared Kenneth was dropped to the ground instantly.

Then the sport wheeled to face his other antagonist.

Stanton was right upon him, and a blow from his fist was coming.

The sport had just time to duck his head to escape it, and then rising suddenly erect he sent out his left arm with force, his fist striking Stanton under the ear and knocking him almost off his feet.

By this time Kenneth was just getting on his feet again, and the two rushed upon the sport together.

The lookers-on began to shout their disapproval, and call for fair play, but they were not heeded, and there was no time to interfere.

With angry oaths both men rushed in at once, showering their blows thick and fast.

Kentucky Jean was a fighter, having the art of self-defense at his command, and he felt confident of his ability.

With a quick movement he stooped down, then gave a sudden spring forward, and passed between his assailants. Then as quick as a flash he turned and attacked them, sending Kenneth to the ground again at the first blow, and a moment later Stanton was sent to join him.

For about two minutes then it was a lively fight. The sport faced first one of his antagonists and then the other, sending one to the ground as soon as the other was up, and acting on the aggressive instead of the defensive.

Finally, in one of his falls, Jared Kenneth struck his head with force upon a stone, and was rendered insensible, and at the same time Stanton cried out "enough."

A wild cheer then broke from the crowd, and the sport was almost lifted up and carried into the bar-room, where a few minutes later another cheer was heard—

"Three cheers for Kentucky Jean, the Youthful Sport from Yellow Pine."

CHAP. ER XXII.

ENTERS A STRANGER.

ON the following morning Kentucky Jean and Charlie Denson set out for Denver, via the early stage from the hotel to connect with the first train.

They conversed but little while in the stage, and nothing was said concerning the business they had in hand.

When they entered the train, however, where they could talk without being overheard, then the sport brought the matter up.

"I suppose," he said, "that Miss Rittens—so I will call her—is fully determined to press this matter and learn the secret of her birth."

"She certainly is. Nothing can turn her from her purpose."

"And you are as anxious as she is?"

"I am. As you know, she had promised to become my wife, but now recalls her promise until the mystery shall have been solved."

"And suppose it is never solved? Suppose we find it impossible to learn the secret of the past?"

"In that case my happiness will be denied me, for I know her well enough to believe that she will never marry. But the truth shall be learned, if I have to move all heaven and earth to bring it to light."

"Then you are fully determined?"

"I am."

"On the other hand, suppose we learn the truth, only to find some dark cloud of sin or shame hanging over the girl's name?"

"For that I care nothing. She is all that is good and pure, and I will marry her, even though her father proves to have been a murderer."

"As I fear he will," the sport observed, "if she is the child of Delwin Mourton."

"What!" and young Denson turned to him in quick surprise.

"I fear that we shall learn that this Delwin Mourton was a murderer."

"Heavens! you do not mean it! What have you learned?"

"I cannot tell you that without betraying a confidence. I have made a discovery, however, and I believe that Delwin Mourton once committed a foul and horrible crime."

"My God! I hope it is not true. Still, I care not. Belle, if she is his child, is in no way accountable for his acts, and she shall be mine."

"How will it be with her, though?" the sport questioned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this: Suppose, when she learns the terrible truth, that she refuses to marry at all?"

"She will not refuse. That point was settled yesterday."

"In what way?"

"In this way: 'Will you,' I asked her, 'become my wife when this mystery is made known, no matter what the secret of the past may be?' and her answer was this:

"If, when the past is laid bare you find me

worthy of you, and then ask me to marry you, I will say—yes."

"It is not to be supposed, though, that she then dreamed of such an event as her father's having been guilty of murder."

"On the contrary that very supposition had been set forth. I will repeat her words to you. 'Suppose, though,' she said, 'you learn that my father's hand was stained with crime, or that my mother's name bore the stigma of shame.'

"You see, friend Grantley, I have her promise, and be the sins of her parents what they may, she shall be mine."

"Yes, if she keeps to her word, you hold the winning cards, and I admire you for the resolve you avow."

"And she will keep her promise. She is all that is noble and good."

"Then we are to go on and bring the past to light, and lay the secrets bare?"

"We are."

"Then we will say no more. I thought I would give you warning of what to expect, so that you could withdraw from the task if you would, and try to bring the girl to do the same."

"Thank you for the warning, but I cannot turn back if I would. To urge Belle to give up the search would only be to urge her forward. No, we must go on and learn the truth, no matter what it is."

"Very well, we will go on. I suppose you have considered the consequence, if, finding Delwin Mourton guilty of murder, we find him alive."

"My God! we should then be the means of bringing him to the gallows!"

"Exactly."

"And Belle— Oh! we must drop the case where it is! I will return and beg her to let it rest."

"Impossible."

"Why is it impossible? She must, she shall give up the search. Her life and happiness depend on it."

"It is impossible for the reason you have yourself given. To urge her to turn back would be to sharpen her desire to go on. She would go on."

"But, if we tell her that such a course may bring her father to die upon the gallows?"

"Still she would go on. She—"

"Heavens! I do not believe it!"

"I tell you she would. She will learn the truth at any cost."

"Even at the cost of her father's life?"

"No, she would aim to avoid that. She would set forth two propositions. One of these would be— 'He may be dead;' and the other— 'If alive, then he must be assisted to escape.'"

"You are right. In truth, the man may be dead; and it may be that he has done no crime."

"Yes, he may be dead; but that he was a murderer, I fear, is all too true. If I could tell you what I know, you would agree with me."

"Have you proof against him?"

"Yes, proof almost positive. Proof which, had it been obtainable some years ago, would have fastened the crime upon him at the time."

"Whom did he murder?"

"Pardon me, but at present I cannot tell you that."

"Very well, I shall not press you."

"And still you say go on?"

"Yes, you have shown me that there is no other course. We will go on."

"So be it. And now I will say that it may be possible to keep the worst of what we may learn to ourselves, and let Miss Rittens know only what is necessary to satisfy her regarding her birth and parentage. I say it may be possible to do this."

"It must be made possible. There is no other way out of the dilemma. I shall trust you to find the plan of action."

"Well, we cannot tell what we shall learn, but I will do all I can."

When they arrived at Denver the sport said: "You are going at once to the office of Dobson & Blake, I suppose?"

"Yes; are you not going with me?"

"Not at once. I have an errand to do first. You will be there an hour at least, and I shall join you there within that time."

"Well, all right; I will wait for you at their office."

And so they separated.

Charlie Denson went directly to the office of the lawyers, and found the partners both in.

There was present also an old man, a man whose hair and beard were white as snow.

This man was Gardner Gernett, whose acquaintance we made in a previous chapter.

The lawyers knew the young man, and Dobson said:

"Ah! Denson, how d'e do?" and he gave his hand.

Charlie responded, nodded to Blake, and sat down.

"Are you busy?" he inquired.

"It is our business to be busy," Dobson responded, playfully, "and the busier we are, the happier we are. Have you come to add to our happiness?"

"I do not know how that may be, sir, but I have come in response to your advertisement concerning one Delwin Mourton."

"Oh-ho!" and both the lawyers sat bolt upright at once, while the old gentleman started and became instantly interested.

"You know something concerning the man's whereabouts?" Dobson queried.

"No," the young man answered, "I do not."

"What then do you know? What is it brings you here?"

"I am here with information concerning a child of the missing man. May I see you in private?"

"It is not necessary, unless we have other callers during our consultation. Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Gardner Gernett, of England, in whose interest our advertisement for Delwin Mourton was issued."

"Mr. Gernett, this gentleman is Mr. Charles Denson."

The two shook hands, and then Mr. Gernett inquired:

"Do I understand you to say, young man, that you know something concerning a child of Delwin Mourton?"

"That is what I said, sir."

"And do you know the person?"

"I do."

"Is the person male or female?"

"Female."

"And do you know her?"

"I do, sir, and well."

"Good. And now, most important of all, can she prove her identity?"

"She can."

It will be remembered that Charlie Denson understood what was at stake, namely—the rich mine usurped by the Imperial Mining Company; but he did not know in what position this Gardner Gernett stood. That is to say, he did not know whether he was in search of his brother's heirs to restore them to their rights, or to oppose them and claim the property for himself. Naturally he thought it was more likely to be the latter, and for this reason he asserted that the girl's identity could be easily established. He had no intention of showing his hand until he knew how the game was going.

The next question, from Mr. Dobson, was to the point.

"Who is the female in question?" he asked.

"Her name," Charlie answered, "is Belle Mourton. She is a young lady, sir, now about nineteen years of age."

"Where does she live?"

"You will pardon me, sir, but I can answer no more questions until I know something about the case. You did not advertise for the children of Delwin Mourton, but for him."

"I admire your caution and business way, young man, I do indeed," declared the Englishman. "Mr. Dobson, please state the case to him, or as much of it as you think proper."

"You'll get nothing out of him until you do, that is sure," said Mr. Blake.

"Well, Denson," Dobson questioned, "are you friendly to that girl's interests?"

"I am, sir."

"Very well. We advertised for Delwin Mourton in order to learn the whereabouts of his wife or children, or both. We care nothing about him whatever. If his wife, child, children can be found, and can prove their identity to us, we will make them rich. If this girl you name can prove her identity, she will soon own one of the richest mines in this State."

"Then you, too, are friendly to her interests?"

"We are."

"And the mine in question is the one once owned by James Gernett, and now held by the Imperial Mining Company, for the recovery of which Mr. Gardner Gernett has recently brought suit?"

"The same."

"Such being the case, what action will Mr. Gernett take in case Miss Mourton comes forward and proves her identity?"

"He will at once resign his claim, and the suit can be carried on in the young woman's name," said Mr. Gernett, answering for himself.

"Your answer satisfies me, sir. I can believe your statement. If you intended to act otherwise, your lawyers would never have spoken out as they have, for they well know that the young woman could engage other counsel and win the case in spite of you and the Imperial Company together."

"You are right," Dobson agreed, "provided she can prove herself the heir."

"And I assure you she can prove that. Here is a copy of one document in her possession."

As he spoke, Charlie handed the lawyer the copy of the marriage-certificate we have seen.

Dobson read it carefully and said:

"Mr. Gernett, the young man's story is sound and an heir is found."

"I am glad it is so."

"Now, Denson," and Dobson settled down to talk business, "I must ask you why it is you appear in this young woman's behalf?"

"A question easily answered, sir. Since we understand one another, I will explain that I hope to make Miss Mourton my wife."

"Oh-ho!"

"And I'm proud to hear you say it," Mr. Gernett frankly declared. "I like you. Mr. Dobson, please explain our case to the young man in full."

"I will do so, and with pleasure, for there must be a mutual understanding upon all points. It is for us to show our hand first, and then he can show us his in turn."

"Which I am willing to do," Charlie at once announced.

In a straightforward manner, then, Mr. Dobson told the story of James Gernett, with all the particulars and details that are known to the reader, including the story told by Mr. Gardner Gernett, with an explanation of all that had been done in the case up to that time.

When he concluded, Charlie Denson started to tell the story of Blue-eyed Belle, but just as he began the door opened, and a stranger entered the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRANGER TALKS.

THE stranger who entered was a man apparently of middle age, roughly and almost shabbily dressed, and looked little better than a genuine specimen of the genus tramp.

Lawyer Dobson shot one quick glance at him, and said:

"You will find the railroad offices on the floor above, my man."

"Don't go off half-cocked, now," the stranger coolly replied, as he closed the door and advanced into the room, "I ain't a-lookin' fer no railroad offices, I ain't; I'm in th' right pew right heur." And he helped himself to a chair as he spoke, and sat down.

"Well, what do you want?" Dobson asked.

The stranger's tone and manner changed instantly, and he replied:

"I am the detective, sir, who is working up the Gernett case. I have called to make a report of progress."

"The deuce you are!" exclaimed Dobson, in the greatest surprise. "You look more like a tramp."

"A fact I must admit. But we have to adopt such disguises once in a while. Are you ready to hear from me?"

"Do you think you have shown good judgment, sir, to mention your business before strangers? to say nothing about proposing to tell your story before them."

"Oh! come now, I hope you will give me credit for a little sense. Who are the strangers? Certainly you and Blake are to hear me, and also Mr. Gernett; while no one is more directly interested in the case than Charlie Denson, who knows almost as much about it as I can tell you. Where are the strangers?"

Dobson settled back in his chair with a smile.

"Go on with your report," he said, "I've nothing more to say."

The detective laughed and said:

"In my former report, which was given to you by the chief, I said I had learned that Delwin Mourton had deserted his wife within a year after their marriage; that the wife had gone away from Denver soon after the death of her father; that all trace of her was lost from that time; that the husband was known to have been seen at Bended Bow in the same year, but there all trace of him was lost; that it was believed that a child had been born to the couple, and so forth."

"Since then I have learned much more."

"I went to Bended Bow, and there was able to get hold of information which amounts to proof almost positive that a certain young lady of that city, who is called Belle Rittens, but who is better known as Blue-eyed Belle, is the daughter of Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett."

"You say you have proof that she is their child?" demanded Charlie Denson.

"I say I have proof, but it is not quite proof positive. In my own mind, however, there is no doubt about it. But hear me out."

"One night in summer, eighteen years ago, when Bended Bow was little more than a wild camp, a peculiar cry was heard, and one Rube Rittens, on going to see what it was, found a baby. It was a female child, and was about a year old. Whose it was no one could tell. No woman had been seen near the camp, and the only woman there was an old negress who did washing for a living. Rube Rittens delivered the child to her, engaging her to take care of it."

"When she came to remove the child's clothes, she found a paper folded under them, secured with a pin. She could not read, and laid the paper away. That paper has just come to light, and proves to be the marriage-certificate of Delwin Mourton and Sibyl Gernett."

"On the same night the child was given to this old negress, and shortly after Rube Rittens had gone away, a stranger—or more properly, perhaps, a masked man—came to her shanty, and arranged to give her twenty dollars a month to care for the child as long as it might live."

"The old negress accepted the offer, and the money has been paid regularly ever since. This is another fact that has just come to light."

"Who that masked man was I cannot say, but I believe it was either Delwin Mourton or some one acting for him."

"Such are the facts."

"Now, how came that child where it was found? and who left it there? Was it carried there by its mother? These questions remain to be answered. My theory is that Sibyl Mourton

was making her way to Bended Bow, with her child in her arms, in quest of her husband, and that in passing along the narrow trail in Blue Stone Canyon, she fell—or was pushed—over the ledge, and was drowned in the river below; while the child, in some way or other, was saved, to be found as described."

"I have visited the Rev. Micah Mahlon, of this city, whose name is signed to the certificate of marriage, and he remembers the event. Of the witnesses, one is dead, and the other I have not yet been able to find."

"The main point, now, is to *prove* this young woman—this Belle Rittens—to be the child of Sibyl Gernett—otherwise Mourton."

"Yes," Dobson agreed, "that is the main point now. Do you think you can accomplish it?"

"I can try, anyhow."

"And you must not fail, my friend," Mr. Gernett enjoined. "Find proof of that girl's right to the Gernett estate, and I will handsomely reward you."

"I will do the best I can, sir."

"But," Mr. Dobson observed, "Charlie here has told us he has proof of the girl's identity. Let us hear *his* story."

Charlie shook his head.

"I was talking with a purpose when I said that," he declared. "I know no more than the detective has just told, but I can attest to the correctness of his story."

"What was your object, then, in saying you had proof?"

"That must be plain enough. Nothing could have induced me to speak otherwise than, not knowing whether you were friendly to the girl's interests or not. I wanted you to think our hand invincible. But, there is one other point you have not mentioned, Mr. Detective, though it may not be known to you."

"What is that?"

"That Blue-eyed Belle has lost the paper, the certificate."

"Yes, I knew that. It is not of great importance, however, for she has ample proof that it was in her possession, and how it came there."

"Yes, that is true. Still it would be far better for her to have the document in her possession."

"You say that certificate is lost?" asked Mr. Gernett.

"Yes, sir."

"How does this affect the case, Dobson?" the Englishman inquired.

"Badly," was the reply. "The paper must be recovered if possible."

"And in case it falls into the hands of the Imperial Company?" asked Charlie.

"They could place the girl at a great disadvantage, if they were inclined to do so. Not that they could keep her out of the property, for Mr. Gernett here will be able to wrest that from them; but they could put more than one block in the way of her discovering the secret of her early life. I do not say they would do this, mind you, but this lost paper would put them on the trail, and it *might* serve them in producing a false heir, if they were inclined to try it."

"It is plain, then, Mr. Gernett averred, "that that paper must be found, and we trust you to find it," addressing the detective."

"I will do all I can," the detective promised.

"And is this all you have to report?" asked Dobson.

"Yes, about all. I must now set out and find trace of Sibyl Gernett and learn what became of her."

"Not an easy task, I should say," Charlie Denson remarked.

"Not by any means, sir, as you and your young friend Grantley will discover," was the detective's response.

"What?" Charlie exclaimed, "you know that I have engaged a man to assist me in a little amateur detective work?"

"Yes, I know that, and let me remark that while he is not a great detective, being little more than a youth, he is strictly honest and reliable. Whatever he promises to do, he will do if he can."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

"And you say, Mr. Denson," questioned Mr. Gernett, "that this young woman is your intended wife?"

"She is, sir. At least I intend to make her my wife if I can."

"But I thought you were already engaged. That is the way I understood it."

"Yes, we are—or were—engaged, but when the secret that there was a mystery concerning her came out, then she withdrew her promise. Now she will not marry me until the secret of the past is made known."

"This, then, explains your interest in the case?"

"Yes."

As the old gentleman said no more, the detective spoke again, addressing Mr. Dobson.

"By the way," he said, "what do you know concerning the case of one Daniel Erving, who was murdered in this city some years ago?"

"Ah!" Dobson exclaimed, "have you discovered something about that strange affair?"

"I cannot say whether I have or not. I have

only just learned of the case. Will you tell me what you know about it?"

"Certainly. It happened about fourteen years ago, I think. Daniel Erving was a lawyer in this city. One day he was found dying in his office, with a knife buried in his breast. He was found thus by his little daughter, a child about eight years of age, if I do not mistake. To her, with his dying breath, he revealed the name of his murderer. So excited and alarmed was she, though, that the name slipped from her mind, and she was never able to recollect it. And so the case remains, under a cloud."

"But how came you to learn of the case? I have not heard it spoken of for years."

"The particulars of it were told me by a friend."

"And you decline to say what brought the matter up, and what you have learned?"

"Well, no, I do not decline to tell you some, thing about it. Do you know what ever became of Erving's daughter?"

"No, I do not. All I know is that she was taken care of by the woman who had been Erving's housekeeper, and she married and went away, taking Amabel with her."

"That was the child's name?"

"Yes."

"And the case happened about fourteen years ago?"

"As near as I can remember."

"That would make the girl now about twenty-two years old."

"Yes, about that."

"Well, I have run across that woman."

"You have?"

"Yes; she is living at Bended Bow."

To these remarks Charlie Denson paid the closest attention. Was there some connection between this murder case and the secret Kentucky Jean had hinted at to him? Was it then a fact that Delwin Mourton had committed murder? And was this Daniel Erving the victim? He would question the sport and learn the truth.

After some further conversation the detective went away.

About twenty minutes later Kentucky Jean entered the office.

Charlie Denson introduced him to those present, and some little time later they both set out to return to Bended Bow, Mr. Gernett and Mr. Dobson saying they would visit that town next day and make the acquaintance of Blue-eyed Belle.

On the way home Charlie brought their former conversation up again, remarking:

"You told me that you believe we shall find that Delwin Mourton was a criminal—a murderer."

"Yes," the sport acknowledged.

"Have you any idea whom he killed?"

"I have."

"Was it one Daniel Erving, a lawyer of Denver?"

"Ha! You have been learning something. Yes, he was the victim. How did you gain this information?"

"Through the detective who is working up the case for Dobson & Blake. I do not know what you have discovered, but I believe that that detective has made the same discovery."

"It may be so."

That evening there was another meeting at the Dallas residence, when Charlie Denson and Kentucky Jean made known the result of their trip to Denver.

Nothing was said, of course, of the suspicion against Delwin Mourton.

Next day Mr. Gernett and Mr. Dobson paid a visit to Bended Bow, saw Blue-eyed Belle, and heard the story—as she knew it—from her own lips.

And then a week or more went by.

CHAPTER XXIV.

REVISAL—MARTIAL MANIFESTOES.

IN the mean time, *The Bow* and *The Arrow* still flourished.

Neither of the editors had yet slain the other, nor had they come to blows; but in print they continued to brand each other as villains of the deepest dye.

Aside from the peculiar features of their unremitting warfare of words against each other, the two papers were all right, and were fairly creditable sheets. They were wide awake to all the news of the day, and especially so to news items of local interest.

Most of the incidents of the foregoing chapters had been published at the time of their occurrence, and duly commented on.

About the first of them had been the incident of the mysterious shot fired into the office of the Break o' Day Mine, and which had been followed by another shot, the one which had come so near costing Rube Rittens's old and faithful housekeeper her life.

These two incidents had been the subject of much editorial comment, but neither paper was able to solve the mystery concerning them.

Then came the little fracas at the Everybody's House, between Kentucky Jean and Jared Kenneth; mention of the little beggar girl; mention of the rescue of Charlie Denson from the road-agents, and the arrest of the latter; of the

youthful sport's rescue of Minnie Denson; etc., etc.

Finally came the story of Blue-eyed Belle, with all the particulars of the case the two journalists could glean.

"There seems to be no doubt," the papers agreed, "that Miss Rittens's true name is Belle Mcurton, and that she is the child of Sibyl Gernett Mourton. This being the case, we are happy to congratulate the young lady upon her good fortune. As the heir of the mentioned James Gernett, she is sure to come into speedy possession of one of the richest gold-mines in this State."

This news made public, Blue-eyed Belle became the object of general interest to all, and Dame Rumor was kept busy.

If Belle had been the belle of the town before, she was even more honored now. The imaginary yellow gleams and golden jingle of the prospective mine, lent new charms to her presence. At least so it was with the young men of the town, with one exception. That exception was Charlie Denson.

He loved the girl for herself alone. In truth, he would have preferred to take her without wealth rather than with.

With Jared Kenneth it was different.

He was now even more determined than ever that the girl should become his wife.

Still he was not blind to the fact that his case was almost hopeless. By no fair means could he ever hope to gain the prize.

In the way of heart affairs, things at Bended Bow were now growing a little complicated. Let us glance over the field and bring to mind how matters stood.

We will mention our hero first.

Kentucky Jean was unmistakably in love with pretty Minnie Denson, while Amabel Erving, or "Incognita, the Faro Queen," was as unmistakably in love with him. Then, on the other hand, a fact we perhaps have not before mentioned, Willis Stanton, the bank cashier, was as hopelessly in love with Minnie Denson as was Jared Kenneth with Blue-eyed Belle. Minnie's affections, however, were all centered upon the youthful sport.

Blue-eyed Belle, our heroine, is to be mentioned next.

She loved Charlie Denson, as has been demonstrated, and was loved by him in return. Not only by him was she loved, but by half the young men of the town, some of whom we will presume, would have laid down their lives for her—especially since they had become aware of her great expectations. And foremost and most determined of all of these, was Jared Kenneth.

Concerning Jared Kenneth, something remains to be told.

In truth we flatter ourselves that we have more than one surprise in store for the reader who will follow us to the end.

Now, since we are in the retrospective vein, we may as well mention our other characters and bring them forward to the present chapter.

Aunt Dinah Bragg was fast recovering from her wound, and was up and about the house, though Belle continued to manage the little cottage and do most of the work.

The money the old negress had hoarded so carefully for so many years, had now been placed in the bank, where it was certainly far safer.

Rube Rittens had but little to say beyond the fact that he hoped the case would soon be cleared up, and that the true fissure would be found and the right vein struck. He hoped it would not turn out to be a blind lead. What he wanted to see was a real "bonanza," he wanted no "barasca" find. And thus he and his bosom friend Peleg Green smoked and talked the case over almost every evening, when they met for an hour at the Everybody's Home, the Enchanted Hall, or some other place of popular resort.

Blue-eyed Belle, too, had little to say, except to Minnie Denson. The two girls met frequently, as formerly, and now they could talk of nothing else besides the unsolved mystery.

Kentucky Jean remained at the hotel, and was liked by everybody, except, of course, his two enemies, Jared Kenneth and Willis Stanton. He visited the Dallas residence quite frequently, ostensibly to see Colonel Dallas or Charlie Denson, though in their absence he was not by any means averse to spending an hour with Minnie. It might have been noticed, too, that he sought Mrs. Dallas's company whenever possible. Perhaps he had an object in so doing.

Besides this, he had paid two or three visits to the Faro Queen. An arrangement had been made by which he could gain access to her presence without the help of her four hirelings, as on the first occasion, which was a vast improvement. He found the strange woman to be a perfect lady in her every word and act, and admired her. Had he met her previously to meeting Minnie Denson, it is possible that she might have won his love. Now it was not.

Charlie Denson and the sport were now sworn friends and companions. Many confidences were exchanged between them, and the sport managed to draw out a great deal concerning the private life of Colonel and Mrs. Dallas, and

much of the family history. As we said of his seeking the company of Mrs. Dallas whenever practicable, perhaps he had an object in view. We shall see.

Colonel Dallas of late had become silent, thoughtful and reserved, while Mrs. Dallas seemed to grow even more so than formerly.

Jared Kenneth and Willis Stanton were often seen in company, and both wore clouded brows and scowling frowns. We shall have more to say of them ere long.

And now to turn our attention to the home of Euphemia Wiggins, the fair young widow of thirty-nine, who considered herself an instrument to do the will of Providence, and who, it seemed, could not forget the "late lamented."

She was a widow still. Neither Major Theobald Miles, General Orrion Wade nor Hans Keppelheim had yet captured the citadel of her heart. Hold! We mistake. What we meant to say is, that neither had yet won her hand. One of the trio had made a captive of her heart, and that one was—can you guess?—honest, good-natured, smiling Hans Keppelheim.

Such was the fact.

Hans, however, was not aware of it. He had not yet put his fate to the test. The secret was yet locked in Euphemia's breast, and the fate of Major Miles and General Wade was decided. Their cases were hopeless. She had made up her mind that she could marry neither of them. If, though, honest Hans should ask for her heart and hand, she had decided that she would consider it the will of Providence that she should hand them over, and act accordingly. In short, she would answer "Yes."

And we are of the impression that she had chosen wisely. Hans was an honest, hard-working and well-to-do man, one whose love could be depended on when once it was won. The two belligerent journalists, on the other hand—Well, we doubt the sincerity of their regard for the widow, anyhow. It is always the empty cask that gives out the loudest sound.

Yes, Hans had the inside track by quite a majority.

"Aunt Belinda," that strange woman whose story we told in a previous chapter, was growing so unlike her former self that Euphemia was becoming alarmed. Not only were her day-dreams becoming more and more frequent, but they were more easily brought on, and were of shorter duration. The distance from the present to the past in the mysterious woman's life seemed to be growing shorter. Was her lost memory returning slowly? It seemed so.

Besides this, she began to evince a desire to wander away from the house, a thing she had never before attempted. Two or three times, of late, Euphemia had been obliged to set out and look for her, finding her walking aimlessly around in some distant part of the town.

Euphemia was constantly in the proverbial "peck of trouble."

Not only did she have Aunt Belinda to look after, but her other protegee, the Mrs. Annie Kent we have introduced, was still with her. This woman's little daughter, Bessie, was very ill with fever, and she had not been able to leave her scarcely for a moment, night or day.

But Euphemia was the soul of patience, goodness and charity in sickness or misfortune, and accepted her troubles bravely. Providence had sent these poor creatures to her, and she meant to do her duty by them; and if dear Wiggins—the "late lamented"—were alive, she knew he would approve of it. As no doubt he would. He might have had secret doubts about Providence having any particular grudge against him, but he would have admitted that Providence was a great fellow, and if Euphemia wanted to turn the house into a charitable institution—Well, he would be willing.

But let us return to our first statements—that *The Bow* and *The Arrow* still flourished, and that neither editor had yet slain the other—and proceed with what we set out to tell about in this chapter.

Ever since the night when they had met at the home of Euphemia Wiggins, the night on which Hans Keppelheim had served them such a clever trick, Major Miles and General Wade had hated each other more cordially than ever, and bitter were the attacks they made upon each other in print.

Over and over again had each exhausted his vocabulary of choice epithets, and each felt the necessity of bringing up something new.

At last they brought the name of the fair young widow into prominence.

And then their warfare became bitter indeed.

One day *The Bow* came out with a red-hot article, an attack upon *The Arrow*, of which the following is the substance in brief:

"How much longer, oh Lord, are we to be thus afflicted? How much longer will the worthy and honorable citizens of this town put up with the nuisance? When will that dog-faced ape across the way be forced to suspend publication of that rotten sheet—*The Arrow*, and rid the town of its presence? May the day be near at hand! The paper is but a loose-jointed apology for a newspaper, at best, and we wonder that it has survived so long as it has. We wonder still more that its editor has so long managed to keep out of jail. Most of all, though, do we wonder why so amiable, well-bred, educated and entertaining a lady as Mrs. Euphemia Wiggins, of this

city, can allow him to enter her presence. We understand that he is married, but has deserted his family, and is now posing as a single man. Oh! if there is a sneaking villain unhung; if there is a crawling reptile alive; if there is a mean and cowardly wretch in the land; if there is a miserable mortal in this world; then that thing across the way—that bald-headed, hump-backed, brainless nothing that edits *The Arrow*—is the creature. Its name is GENERAL ORRION WADE (?)."

But *The Bow* did not have it all its own way. In the other paper was a similar attack, of which the following is an outline:

"It surprises us beyond measure to note how long, and with what patience, the people of this city have endured the affliction that is forced upon them in the form of a worse than worthless sheet called a 'newspaper'; and to see its editor, that braying jackass, allowed to remain in our midst. *The Bow* is worse than a disgrace to the city, and the crank who edits it is worse than that. We long to see the day when the citizens of this town will rise up and crush him and his paper out of existence as they deserve. We wonder that they have not done so long ago. What surprises us still more, though, is to think that so fair, so winning, so refined and so charming a lady as Mrs. Euphemia Wiggins, of this city, will allow the wretch to visit her home. She surely cannot know that he is said to be an ex-Mormon, with half a dozen wives and a score or more of children behind the scenes. Oh! the miserable cur! the low-born offspring of foreign outcasts! If there lives a soulless thief; if there exists a degraded wretch; if there is a perjurer among us; if there is a whining, snapping, snarling, miserable dog at our heels; then that wretched specimen of humanity across the street—that bow-legged, thin-skinned, long-fingered, empty-headed *nobody* that edits *The Arrow*—fills the bill. The creature's name is (said to be) MAJOR THEOBALD MILES."

This was going pretty strong, but the next issue of each paper was even worse. And the next after that capped the climax. Want of space forbids our entering their warlike lampoons in full, so let it suffice to say that the next succeeding issue brought forth a challenge from each, which in the next day's papers was promptly accepted.

And they evidently meant business, too, for preparations were begun at once, and the forthcoming event became the talk of the town.

Apropos, their papers sold like hot cakes, and their presses had to be kept running night and day to supply the demand.

The result of the duel will be given in a later chapter.

CHAPTER XXV.

PLOTS AND PLANS.

LATE one evening, in a room in the Everybody's Home Hotel, two men were seated at a table, smoking and talking.

These two were Jared Kenneth and Willis Stanton.

Both were perfectly sober, and they were evidently there to talk business.

The faces of both still bore traces of the iron-like fists of Kentucky Jean, and, as we shall see, they had not forgotten their vows of revenge.

The room was Kenneth's, and Stanton had evidently but recently come in.

Their cigars had just been lighted.

"Well," Stanton observed, as he leaned back in his chair and threw his feet up upon the corner of the table, "how does the case stand now?"

"What case?"

"Why the one you are most interested in."

"Well, I'm interested in several. I suppose you mean the girl case, though."

"Exactly. How does it stand? Is there any better hopes of your winning?"

"No, hang it! it remains the same. In fact, Blue-eyed Belle won't give me a chance to speak to her."

"Won't, eh?"

"No."

"And where's Rube?"

"Hang Rube! When there is the ghost of a chance that I might take the advantage of, he is sure to be around."

"And you can't win him over to your side, eh?"

"No, sir! My dog is dead so far as he is concerned. But, Willis, that girl shall be mine! I have sworn it and I mean it."

"But how are you going about it? If she won't marry you she won't, and there, I should say, is an end of it."

"Not much! She's got to marry me. I'm going to steal her and force her to do it."

"The deuce you are!"

"That's the programme, and that's why I wanted to see you to-night; I want you to help me."

"Thunder! Jared, it's a risky thing to undertake!"

"You're not afraid, I hope, are you?"

"No, I'm not afraid, but you see what a risk it is. There's Rube Rittens to buck against, and Charlie Denson, to say nothing of that cursed sport—Kentucky Jean. It's no boy's task, I can tell you."

"Of course it ain't, and that's why I want your help. If we together can't accomplish the job, we'd ought to give up."

"Yes, but where am I to make anything out of it?"

"Are you not my friend? and are you not willing to do me a favor without the question of reward?"

"Ordinarily, yes; but this is an almighty big favor you ask of me. If we slip up in the thing it may send me to prison."

"The bigger the favor I ask the greater the test of your friendship."

"No doubt."

"And I never imagined there was any weak blood in your veins, before."

"Oh! I'm no coward! I merely wanted to call your attention to the risk you ask me to take. Say no more, I'll help you."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will. I mean it."

"Good! I thought I could depend on you, Willis; and now that I've got your promise without any inducement, we will talk of a reward."

"What do you mean now?"

"I mean to return favor for favor."

"How? I know of no way in which you can render me any service."

"Well, I do, if you do not."

"How—what is it?"

"You love Minnie Denson, and—"

"Ha! I see your idea! I had not thought of it. Jared Kenneth, you put the devil into my brain whenever I am with you. Do you think it can be done?"

"Of course it can! If one girl can be carried off, why not the other?"

"You're right, by heavens! And you will help me to do it?"

"Yes. You help me and I'll help you. It will be an even thing. There's a mighty big risk to run, as you said, but at the same time the reward is big, too."

"You are right."

"Besides, that is our only hope. In no other way can we ever win those girls."

"There is where you're right again. In your case Charlie Denson has a big hold, and in mine—"

"In yours that accursed sport, Kentucky Jean, is in the way. Any one with half an eye can see that he and Minnie Denson are mutually stuck on each other."

"I know it."

"And in my own case that prospective fortune will be a big thing for me. Oh! I've got to have that girl, and have her I will, or die in the attempt to win her."

"Yes, that Denver mine will be a big thing for you, if the girl gets it and you get the girl, or vice versa; and you must go in to win. But what are we to do with the dear creatures when we have captured them?"

"I have that all arranged. There is an old house up in the mountains, deserted, that will answer our purpose to a dot."

"And you intend to keep them there till they comply with our demands?"

"Exactly."

"Suppose, though, they prove stubborn and won't yield?"

"Oh! but they will yield fast enough, after a few weeks of confinement. If not, then we will keep them till they do. I fancy they will be glad enough to marry us."

"But, suppose after all the girl does not prove to be the heir to the Denver property?"

"That will be bad—for the girl, but I will have her, anyhow, and then I have another grand trump-card in reserve."

"What is it?"

"I cannot tell you just now. I may not use it, but if I have to— Well, I shall make a grand struggle for that property, you bet!"

"Do you think it is wise, though, for us to put the girls there in that house together? Would they not be likely to find some means of escape?"

"Bless you, no. I shall have some one there to watch them all the time. Besides, the doors and windows are all secured. I doubt whether two men could escape, even if left in the house with free limbs and no one to watch them. Oh! no, they can't get away when once we get them there."

"And how came you to think of this plan?"

"Why, it was Hobson's choice with me. There is no other way, as we have agreed. It was first suggested, though, by that attack upon Miss Denson a week or more ago. I had an idea at the time that that was your work."

"No, it was not. I had not thought of such a scheme before you unfolded it to me a few minutes ago. I know nothing about it."

"I believe you. In fact, after seeing the rascals in jail next day, I decided that they were only common footpads, whose intentions were to abduct the girl and hold her for ransom—or worse."

"Something like the fellows who waylaid Charlie Denson, eh? Their purpose was robbery, though."

"Yes, the fools! they might have known the young fellow would not have the cash with him. The banks are safer."

"You're right. And that reminds me to tell you that your Blue-eyed Belle has over four thousand dollars in our bank. If you get the girl you'll get something, anyhow."

"Even four thousand dollars is better than nothing."

"I should think so!"

"But, your mention of that attack upon Charlie Denson, with mine of the assault upon his sister, brings my mind to something else."

"What is that?"

"The fellow who rescued them."

"Kentucky Jean?"

"Yes, curse him! We have a score to settle with him, if my memory does not fail me, and by heavens he shall pay dearly for his work! A pretty pair of eyes we have each been exhibiting for over a week."

"You're right. But the fellow is real chain lightning, boy though he is."

"He may be a boy in years, but he is a man in muscle and experience. But, no matter what he is, he shall pay for his freshness. I tell you what it is, Willis, that account has got to be squared."

"I agree with you."

"And there is no time like the present to attend to such matters. We have put it off long enough already."

"Again I agree. We have put it off too long, if anything."

"Then let us to work and settle the score with him."

"I'm willing enough, I assure you. It makes my blood boil whenever I see him on the street."

"And mine, too."

"Well, what is your plan?"

"I haven't laid out any. Can't you give me a point?"

"Perhaps I can. In the first place, we must bear in mind that he is no child. He may give us more than we bargain for."

"We must take the chances of that. We must lay our trap, though, so that there will be no chance for him to defend himself."

"You don't mean to kill him?"

"Well, no, perhaps not; but he won't get off very easily, you can bet!"

"If you mean murder," Stanton declared, firmly, "I shall back out. I want the account squared as badly as you do, but I draw the line at murder."

"Well, we'll stop short of that, and give him only a good beating, and mar his beauty a little."

"I don't care how much you beat him, and I'll do my share of it; but I'm not the man to stain my hands in blood if I can get out of it. I never drop a man except in self-defense."

"Well, that point's agreed. I've got an ugly temper, though, and if he gets out of my hands without losing his ears, nose, or tongue he will be lucky."

"But we haven't got him yet."

"True enough; and I asked you to give me a point."

"So you did. Well, have you any men at the mine you can depend on?"

"Yes, half a dozen of them."

"And can you find them to-night?"

"Yes."

"Well, we will want four of them at the least to make success certain."

"All right, I can get them; go on with your plan. What do you want these men to do?"

"I will show you. Do you know where the sport is to-night?"

"I am not sure, but I think I saw him enter the Enchanted Hall about an hour ago."

"No doubt he is there now, then. Can you write a decoy letter?"

"Yes; or no doubt you can do it better than I."

"Well, my plan is this: If the sport is out, he will no doubt return here to the hotel about midnight. It is after eleven now. When he comes he will find the decoy letter awaiting him. He will go at once to the place it names. Then we will be in waiting for him, and there we can strip him to the waist and flog him as he deserves."

"That is the idea, exactly! Go to work and write the letter at once."

"All right; trot out pen and paper, and I'll do it in no time. I'll sign Charlie Denson's name to it."

"That's a good idea. He and the sport are regular chums."

"I know it, and I know they are not together to-night, for young Denson went to Denver to-day, and does not expect to be back before to-morrow afternoon."

"Good! Everything favors us."

"And to-morrow night we will get the two girls into our hands in a similar way."

"Yes, for we certainly cannot get up a better scheme."

"Well, what are we to say in this note? It must be something not likely to awaken suspicion, you know."

"Make it the same old story: if he would learn of something to his interest, and so forth, meet—"

"Hold on! you forget that Charlie Denson's name is to be signed to it."

"Oh, the deuce! so you said. Well, make it anything you please. You know more about it than I can tell you, I guess."

Drawing the paper to him, Stanton began to

write, and in a few minutes the decoy letter was all ready, and sealed and addressed.

"There," the writer said, as he laid down the pen, "that is done, and now for the result."

Lighting fresh cigars, the two donned their hats and left the room, and going down to the main floor, passed out-doors.

Turning their steps toward the Enchanted Hall, they soon met a man who would answer their purpose, and engaged him to carry the letter back to the hotel and give it to the landlord, cautioning him, if asked, to say he had received it from Charlie Denson.

This done, the plotters went on, and in half an hour all their plans were completed.

What the result would be they of course could not foreknow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DECOYED.

KENTUCKY JEAN was, as Jared Kenneth had said he thought he was, that evening, at the Enchanted Hall.

He was paying a visit to Miss Erving, or "Incognita, the Faro Queen."

She was entertaining him in her handsomely furnished parlor, while her companion, or "double," was presiding at the faro-table in her stead.

This was the sport's fourth visit since the first memorable occasion, and the more he saw of the lady, the more he admired and respected her.

She was a charming talker, and often played and sung for him, and an evening in her company seemed to pass all too soon.

But the sport's regard for her was not of love.

He admired her, as we admire any one who pleases us, but he did not love her. His heart was already pledged to another.

Little had been said concerning the matter that had been the subject of their first interview, but it was plain that the woman's love for the sport was earnest and lasting, and that she was doing her best to draw his affections to her.

Jean saw this plainly enough, and it troubled him not a little.

On this occasion, when the hour was drawing near for him to take his leave, Incognita laid her hand upon his arm, as they sat together on the sofa and said:

"You have not forgotten our agreement, or rather your promise?" in a questioning tone.

"No, I have not forgotten it," Jean replied.

"I was beginning to fear you had."

"You were? and why?"

"Because I am not blind, and I can see that another is winning your heart."

Her tone was one of sadness, with no trace of anger, and the sport was almost at loss to know how to reply. As we have said before, when the reader has followed us to the end he will be able to appreciate the delicate plays our hero had to make in this game of hearts. He could promise nothing, he could deny nothing; and still, he must hold her good will if he could.

"Whom do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean Minnie Denson."

"It is true," said Jean, "that I am often in her company."

"And true that you are learning to love her. Is it not so?"

"I respect and admire her."

"And me?"

"So do I respect and admire you."

"But you do not love me?"

"Admiration may turn to love at a moment's notice."

"As I fear it is turning—in the other case."

"I cannot tell you. Had you any control over your heart, when it turned toward me?"

"I had not."

"Then do not expect me to have any control over mine. If you are just, you cannot expect me to direct my love at will."

"True, true. But you must, you shall learn to love me," in a voice low but firm. "Without your love I cannot live."

"You shall have the answer at the time agreed upon, or earlier, perhaps."

"Very well, I must wait, and in the mean time I shall do all in my power to gain a place in your heart. Tell me, is she—Miss Denson—more fair than I?"

"She is not."

"Is she more accomplished?"

"She is not."

"And I know that she is not near so rich. There is hope still; but Heaven help me if you pass me by. I am a strange woman, but my heart is wholly a woman's heart, and it is wholly yours. Do with it as you will."

The sport was pained, for well he knew that his heart was not his to give, even had he so desired.

When he rose to go, some minutes later, the Faro Queen said:

"Do you know, Jean, that I have a strange feeling of dread that some danger is threatening you? a premonitory sentiment that some ill is about to befall you?"

"I have little faith in such things," the sport answered, lightly. "When danger is to be seen, it is time enough for me to be troubled. I never borrow trouble."

"I, on the contrary, have faith in my natural intuition, and I beg you to be cautious and on the lookout for danger."

"Thank you for the warning. I shall try to keep out of danger."

"This presentiment may mean nothing, and yet it may mean a great deal: so, for my sake, be careful."

"I will. I am more than ever on the lookout for danger since the night I fell so easily into the hands of your men."

They left the room and ascended the stairs to the narrow passage, and after a glance into the faro room, as once before described, the sport bade his fair hostess good-night and went away.

Passing around to the street, he made his way at once to the hotel, his mind preoccupied with thoughts concerning the strange case in which he was playing a part.

He was not careless to his surroundings, however, and it would have been no easy matter for any one to have taken him again by surprise.

When he reached the hotel and entered the bar-room, the worthy Teuton landlord exclaimed:

"Ah! mein leib Genducky Cheans, how you vas, eh? Here vas ein letter for you, may pe."

"A letter for me?" the sport repeated doubtfully, as he took the missive from the Dutchman's hand; "where did it come from?"

"It vas left here py a feller about ein half-hour ago, may pe, I guess. He says it vas important."

"Yes, it is for me," the sport decided, as he read the superscription, which was this:

"JEAN GRANTLEY, ESQ.,

"Everybody's Home."

"It vas all right, eh?"

"Yes, it is all right. Did you know the fellow who left it?"

"Ya—ya, I knowed him; he vas a feller what vorks at the Preak o' Day Mine."

"Ah! and did he say who sent this by him?"

"Ya, he let fall der slip that it vas Charlie Denson, I guess, may pe; I dunno."

"Charlie Denson! why, he is at Denver! But perhaps if I read it I'll learn more."

"Ya," Hans agreed, "that vas ein goot idee."

Tearing open the envelope, the sport drew out the sheet it contained, and read:

"FRIEND JEAN:—Returning unexpectedly from Denver, I have stumbled upon something of interest to us both. Not knowing where to find you, I send this note to the hotel. If you receive it before, or by, twelve o'clock, or even later, come at once to the old cabin in the woods on the other side of the canyon—the cabin we were looking at the other day when Willis Stanton passed by. I have a prisoner there. Yours in haste,

"CHARLES DENSON."

Not even a suspicion of the truth entered his mind.

He had seen Charlie Denson's writing and signature, and this was to all appearances his.

And so ingeniously was the missive worded, that not a shade of doubt of its genuineness was created.

The sport took the explanation just as given, and thrusting the note into his pocket, glanced at the clock and went out.

"Vell, vell," muttered honest Hans, as he gazed after him, "I vonder vat's in der vind now!"

Wondering what could be the discovery his friend had made, and still more who the prisoner could be, the sport turned his steps up the street and hastened away toward the bridge that spanned the Blue Stone Canyon.

The old cabin mentioned was about a quarter of a mile beyond the bridge, and a short distance back from the road, and was about the only one that remained of the Bended Bow of the past—of the town as described in our opening chapter.

It had formerly been occupied by Mr. Denson, Charlie's father, during his first year at Bended Bow.

Passing by on the road one day together, Charlie had called the sport's attention to it, and they had turned in to look at it.

While they were there, Willis Stanton passed by on horseback, and saw them, as they did him.

It was this circumstance that enabled the cashier to word his note so effectively.

With no thought of a suspicious sort the sport hastened on, and was soon at the bridge.

Of course he had no intention of entering the woods without being fully prepared for any emergency, for a detective—amateur or otherwise—must be constantly on the alert for danger; but, as said, he had no suspicion that the letter he had received was a decoy, and that he was being lured into a trap.

He was not long in ignorance of the truth, however.

Barely had he crossed the bridge, when four men, with their boots muffled in pieces of old blankets and bagging, rushed after him from behind the end of the iron-work of the abutment of the structure, and the first he knew of their presence was when they laid their hands upon him in no gentle manner, and made him their prisoner.

Once again he had been cleverly captured.

Not a sound had he heard, the men having their feet padded as shown, and so unexpected had come the attack that there was no chance for him to make a move in defense.

This attack had been carefully planned.

The men had a knowledge of the sport's prowess, and they reasoned that as he drew near to the old cabin he would be on the lookout for danger, and to attack him there might cost some of them their lives; but to waylay him at the bridge, where all the chances would be in their favor, they were more certain of success.

The result is shown.

The sport struggled desperately, but all to no purpose, for in the hands of four men one man can do but little; so he soon desisted and reserved his strength.

His first thought was that he had again been set upon by the Faro Queen's men, but a moment's reflection caused him to throw that thought aside.

He knew her too well now to believe her capable of treachery to him.

No, these were not her men.

The men were masked, but they were not such big, brawny fellows as the four who had attacked him before.

Quickly he was disarmed and gagged, and his hands secured behind his back, and then the men laid hold of him and forced him with them into the woods, hurrying him along in the direction of the old cabin.

Not a word had been spoken.

The sport now understood the whole plot, and mentally cursed himself for his stupidity, as he chose to class it, in falling into the trap so easily.

It was as clear as day to him.

Charlie Denson, he knew, had had no intention of returning before the morrow, and even had he done so, and the circumstances were the same as set forth in the letter purporting to be from him, what need to add the words—"the cabin we were looking at the other day when Willis Stanton passed by?"

The whole plot was revealed, and that one sentence proved Willis Stanton to be the writer of the letter.

Why, he asked himself, could he not see through the scheme at once? Why had he been so stupid?

Was it stupidity? Might not an older man than he have been deceived in the same way under the same circumstances? Be that as it might, we offer no excuse for our hero, except to call attention to the fact that he was but a youth, and of course lacked the experience that comes with the years of manhood's prime.

Such experience as he was now gaining, however, must soon teach him the lesson of caution. Such a schooling must soon inure him to danger, and teach him to be constantly on his guard, no matter what the appearances might be.

Mentally he vowed that never again would he be so easily overreached, if he had the good fortune to get out of his present dilemma alive, which he had doubts about.

He was certain that he was in the power of Jared Kenneth and Willis Stanton, as certain of it as he was later when the truth of the situation was revealed; and he believed Jared Kenneth to be a man who would not hesitate to put him out of the way.

On through the woods he was conducted, and at length the old cabin was reached.

There two other men were in waiting, they, too, wearing masks.

"Heur he be, cap'n," said one of the four who had made the capture, "an' now what's ter be did wi' him?"

Kentucky Jean was in no friendly hands, and his very life, so far as Jared Kenneth was concerned, was in peril.

How would he escape?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VILLAIN FOILED.

"KENTUCKY JEAN, my gay and festive sport," said Kenneth, whose voice the sport recognized in spite of his attempt to disguise it, "what an obliging fellow you are, to come when you are sent for;" removing the sport's gag.

"Yes, Jared Kenneth," the sport responded, "I received the note written by our friend Stanton here, and hastened to come at once as requested. I can't say that I am in any way obliged to you for the escort you so thoughtfully furnished, though."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Kenneth laughed, as he at once threw aside his mask, "you are a cute one, and no mistake; but we got the bulge on you by placing our men where you least expected to find any one, didn't we? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, yes, you *did* get the best of me there, as I am willing to admit. A man is bound to fall once in a while, he can't help it; and whenever it comes my turn, I'm always ready to own the corn."

"Sensible idea. Say, though, how in the deuce did you tumble to that letter, and who wrote it? Come, Willis," turning to that wor-

thy, "you may as well drop your rag: the fellow is sharper than steel."

"What in thunder did you want to own it for?" Stanton growled, as he snatched off his mask: "he was only guessing at it. You needn't have mentioned me."

"Well, it was a mighty straight guess, anyhow. Say, sport; do you know why we have brought you here?"

"I'm not worth a cent at guessing riddles, and never was."

"Well, I'll save you the trouble of guessing this one. We're going to settle that little score we owe you. We have brought you here to flog you."

"The dickens you have!"

"It is so, I can tell you."

"And only six of you to do it?" as the sport glanced around, and there was a tinge of irony in the words.

"Do you see this?" cried Kenneth in rage, ignoring the remark, and as he spoke he held a most cruel-looking rawhide whip up to view.

"Yes," Jean answered calmly, "I see it. Have you turned bullwhacker?"

"Curse you! I'll turn *you* before I've done with you! I'm going to whip you with this till I make the blood fly with every cut. Here, men! replace this gag in the fellow's mouth."

At once the four men sprung to obey, and in a trice the sport was again gagged.

"Now, men, give attention," Kenneth continued. "I want you to strip this sport to the waist, and then tie him up by his thumbs to a convenient limb. Now, go for him!"

"Hold!"

Clear and sharp came the word, and in a woman's voice.

Instantly action was suspended, and all eyes turned toward the quarter whence the sound came.

"Raise one finger against that man," the voice added, "and you die! Step back from him, one and all!"

With the command, the speaker stepped out into view.

In each hand she held a cocked and leveled revolver, and over her face was a mask of silk.

It was Incognita, the Faro Queen.

"Step back, I say," she repeated, "or as surely as the stars shine above us I will shoot, and shoot to kill!"

Without a word the men fell back, Kenneth and Stanton included.

A few steps behind the Faro Queen could be seen the forms of four men, dimly outlined.

She had not come alone.

"You cowards!" she exclaimed, in tremulous tones—tremulous with scorn, "you all deserve to be served as you intended serving this man! Come forward, my men, and show them to light."

Instantly the queen's four men advanced, taking their places on each side of her, and then at once four bull's-eye lanterns flashed their light upon the scene.

And, taken as a whole, a thrilling scene it was.

Jared Kenneth glared at the woman in sullen hatred, and Willis Stanton seemed fairly to cringe under the glare of light, while their four hirelings shrunk back as though anxious to get a chance to steal away in the darkness.

"Now, Jared Kenneth," the woman commanded, "you step forward and remove that gag from the prisoner's mouth, and release his hands."

The tone of voice she used carried with it the impression that she meant business, and Kenneth stepped forward and did as directed.

The moment he was freed, the sport bowed to the woman, and said:

"Madame Incognito, I owe you a debt I can never repay. You have saved my life, I do not doubt."

The queen inclined her head, and replied:

"We will speak of that later." Then to Kenneth she added:

"Now, restore his weapons to him."

This Kenneth ordered his men to do, and in a moment more the sport was not only free, but armed.

"Now," said Incognita, "it is for you to say what shall be done with these men. Shall I order my men to give them five or ten cuts apiece with the whip they were about to apply to you?"

"It would serve them right," Jean replied; "but, if you are willing, we will let them go. I could not demean myself to strike a man who is helpless in my power."

This cut as deeply as the whip could have done; and while Kenneth pressed his lips in silent rage, Stanton's face flushed with shame.

"Very well," Incognita agreed; "it shall be as you say. You have a noble heart. Turn your weapons upon them now, and make them do your will."

The sport covered the six men, and the Faro Queen lowered her weapons.

The tables were now turned.

"Jared Kenneth," the sport said, "you had me in your power a moment ago, and I have no doubt you intended to do all that you threatened. Now I intend to return good for evil, and let you and Stanton and your men go free."

"You're a fool if you do," was the sullen re-

tort. "I'll get you in my power again some time, and show you no more favor for so doing. I owe you a grudge, and I'm going to pay it sooner or later, and with interest. So if you've got any sense, you'll get in your work on me while you can."

"No, I prefer not to do so. And, if I ever fall into your hands as easily another time, I shall deserve to be flogged, and you will be welcome to give it to me."

"With me," declared Stanton, "you may call the score settled. I'm no coward, but I begin to see that this thing might have been carried too far—as I fear it would. I'm glad the interruption came."

"You're a fine one!" Kenneth sneered.

"Oh! you'll find me all right in most of things," Stanton avowed, "but I draw the line at blood; and I fear blood would have been on our hands had we not been stopped."

"Your head is level, Stanton," the sport remarked. "Come, you other fellows, just remove those masks and let me get a look at your faces. It will be a pleasure to know you when we meet again."

The men strongly objected to this at first, and begged to be let off unknown.

But they begged in vain.

The sport meant to know who they were, and at his next command, more sternly given, they took their masks off.

And a shame-faced set they were. Two of them at least had more than once drunk at Jean's expense.

"I've had the pleasure of seeing you before, I think," the sport remarked, "and I'll remember you. Now, hold up your hands, every mother's son of you!"

The order was obeyed.

"Now, Madame Incognita, if you will kindly direct one of your men to disarm them, I shall be glad."

The woman directed one of her men to take their weapons away from them, and in a few minutes the order was executed.

The sport further directed them to toss the weapons into the old cabin, and when this was done, said:

"Now, you fellows may go. Don't fool around here, but go at once; and later you can return and get your tools of war out of the cabin. Now, go!"

And the rascals went, glad enough to get away.

"My time will come, my youthful sport," Kenneth called back, "and when it does—then look out!"

"Only take care you don't overreach yourself," the sport cautioned.

"And you, my lady," the villain supplemented, addressing the Faro Queen, "I shall not forget you, either."

Incognita made him no reply.

When they had passed out to the road, and turned their steps toward the town, then the Faro Queen turned to her men and said:

"You follow on after them, but do not interfere with them. I shall not need you again to-night."

"All right," came from the four at once, and bidding the queen good-night, they set out.

Incognita turned then to the sport.

"You see now," she said, "that I was not deceived. I knew some canger was threatening you—knew it as well as I know it now."

"But, how did you learn what it was was? and where to find me?"

"I followed you, at a distance, with my men. We were in the shadows on the opposite side of the street when you came out of the hotel, and I suspected the truth at once. Perhaps now you will believe in woman's instinctive foresight, will you not?"

"I certainly shall. And I must again thank you for the great service you have rendered me. I have no doubt that Jared Kenneth meant to mark me for life, if he did not in fact kill me."

"Nor have I. But, let us say no more about that. You know what prompted me to follow you, and I am glad that I have been able to be of service to you."

"Yes, I know, and I shall not forget the service. Had we not better be going?"

"I think so."

Arm-in-arm then they started, not by way of the main road, but by a path that led through the woods. And as they walked along they conversed pleasantly.

"What is your opinion of Willis Stanton?" the sport presently asked.

"It is not so bad as it is of Jared Kenneth," Incognita replied. "I do not believe he is a bad man at heart, but he is easily led into evil ways."

"My own opinion, exactly. Were it not for Jared Kenneth I believe he would be quite a decent sort of fellow."

"But here we are at the bridge!"

"Yes, and here I must leave you."

"Will you not allow me to accompany you?"

"No, I prefer to return to the Hall alone."

Together they crossed the bridge, and then said, "Good-night," and parted, Incognita turning into a side street to make her way around to the Enchanted Hall unseen, if possible, and Kentucky Jean going at once to the hotel.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE MYSTERY STILL.

At an early hour the next forenoon a great excitement arose in Bended Bow.

Pretty Minnie Denson had mysteriously disappeared.

Nor could she be found, though a thorough search was made.

Where could she be?

That was the question asked by one and all.

Early on the previous evening she had left the house alone, telling her mother, Mrs. Dallas, that she was going to call on Blue-eyed Belle.

Asked when she would return, she had replied that she would very probably be back within an hour.

The hour passed, and another, and still another; and when midnight came she had not yet returned.

Mrs. Dallas had retired rather early, not feeling well, and falling asleep, did not wake up till morning.

No one else knew that Minnie was out, Charlie being away from home, and at the usual hour the house was closed for the night.

At breakfast Colonel Dallas inquired where Minnie was, and Mrs. Dallas sent one of the servants to her room at once to call her.

When the servant returned she reported that Minnie was not in her room, and that the bed had not been disturbed.

Then the household felt the greatest alarm, and the excitement began.

Mrs. Dallas told what she knew, that the girl had set out to visit Blue-eyed Belle, expecting to return in an hour.

Charlie, who had returned from Denver by the earliest train, went at once to Rube Rittens's house, there to learn that Minnie had not been there on the previous night at all.

This changed the feeling from one of alarm to one of actual fear, and then the excitement became general.

Kentucky Jean went at once to the jail to question the prisoners—the men who had made the attack upon the girl as described in a previous chapter. His idea was that some of their companions had carried the girl off.

The prisoners declared earnestly, however, that they knew nothing whatever about the matter, and that they had no companions or friends anywhere in the neighborhood.

Work at the mine was stopped, and the men were formed into searching parties, with orders to scour the country for miles in every direction.

Other mines, too, were stopped, and by noon there were hundreds of men out searching for the missing girl.

No one of the searchers was more alarmed, or more thoroughly in earnest, than Kentucky Jean.

He worked like a beaver, helping to form and direct the searching parties, and doing all that possibly could be done.

Colonel Dallas sent telegrams to all neighboring towns where the telegraph extended, while Charlie Denson dispatched messengers in all directions.

Finally, however, night came, and still the missing one had not been found.

Jared Kenneth, being in Mr. Dallas's employ, had been obliged to work as hard as any one else during the day, though he was well enough satisfied in his own mind as to what had become of the girl.

He believed that Willis Stanton was in some way at the bottom of it, and that even on the previous night, when they had talked about that very matter, and planned to abduct Minnie and Blue-eyed Belle, he, Willis, was acting a double part, and had Minnie already in his power.

But Kenneth was mistaken.

Willis Stanton knew no more where the missing girl was than any one else.

In the evening Kenneth was pacing to and fro in his room in the hotel, his brow clouded and his lips compressed.

His mind was busy.

It was plain to him that this excitement was likely to interfere with his plans concerning Blue-eyed Belle.

It would be almost impossible for him to carry them out.

But he did not by any means give up the project. He was striving to find some way to accomplish the end he had in view.

Clearly, he must act alone. He now had little confidence in Stanton. The action of the latter on the previous night, when the tables had been turned by the unexpected interference of the Faro Queen, revealed the fact that he was too much inclined to lean toward the side of honesty and truth to be trusted. And, too, his duplicity in the matter of abducting Minnie Denson, made it plain that he placed no confidence in him—Kenneth.

"Curse the white-livered fool!" Kenneth muttered fiercely as he strode up and down the room, "why did he not tell me he had already made a captive of Minnie Denson? Then I would have known what to do. I would have made an attempt to get hold of Blue-eyed Belle, instead of fooling my time away with that accursed sport."

"But where in the name of Satan can he have

taken the girl? The town has been fairly swept and dusted to find her, and the whole county has been searched. I'll swear it is a mystery to me!

"And— Ah! here he comes now!"

Steps were heard along the hall, and the next moment there came a knock at Kenneth's door.

"Come in!" was the invitation; and the door opened and Willis Stanton entered the room.

"You're here at last, are you?" Kenneth said, with a growl.

"Yes," was the response, "I'm here. What's the matter with you? you snap at me as though I were your servant. I've been trying all day to get a word with you, and now when I come to your room I find you growling like a bear."

"You say you've been looking for me all day? What did you want?"

"I wanted to speak about that missing girl."

"Oh! did you? Well, I wonder you didn't think to do so last night."

"What do you mean now?"

"I mean just this: when you were here last night, and we were talking and laying plans, you had Minnie Denson then in your possession."

"Just the idea I thought you would form, when I heard she was missing."

"What! do you mean to tell me that you do not know where she is? that you did not abduct her?"

"That is just what I mean to say, and what I have tried to get a chance to say. I know no more about her and her whereabouts than you do."

"Thunder! is this the truth?"

"It is true, I swear it."

"Then where is she?"

"That is something I would like to know."

Kenneth was now completely at sea. He could not doubt Stanton's word, for he knew him well enough to feel satisfied that he was speaking the truth; and the mystery was clearly as deep to him as to any one else.

It was something Kenneth could not understand.

"Well," he asked, "what is your idea in regard to it? Have you any theory to advance?"

"No, I have none. The only explanation I can offer is the one generally accepted, that she has been carried off by roughs."

"Of course you see this plays the very mischief with my plans concerning Blue-eyed Belle. I'll have to give the matter up."

"That's too bad, too, with such a fortune at stake. If there is anything I can do to help you, don't hesitate to say so. I'm willing to keep to the promise I made last night."

"There is nothing you can do. If I undertake it at all, I shall have to go it alone. But I am inclined to do no more about it."

"If Blue-eyed Belle, too, were suddenly to disappear, what an excitement there would be."

"You're right."

"And no doubt some connection would be suspected between the two cases."

"Yes, that would naturally follow."

"And where would suspicion fall?"

"Where would suspicion fall? How can I tell. Has it fallen anywhere, except upon some suspected but unknown confederates of those fellows in jail?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then what are you getting at?"

"Well, just this: You have once or twice or more times asked Rube Rittens for Belle's hand in marriage, and you have told me that you said to him on the last occasion that you would have her, by fair means or foul; or words to that effect."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Do you not see, then, that Rube will be likely to suspect you, and turn attention to you at once?"

"By heavens! you are right. But, suppose I am suspected, what can they make out of it?"

"They will shadow you day and night."

"That would be awkward."

"You are right it would; and it would be the means of spoiling any other little games you may be interested in."

"That is so, and there's no getting around it. But, suppose I manage the affair well, and get the girl out of the way without being seen, couldn't I manage to throw suspicion off my track in some way?"

"Possibly you might, but I do not see how you could do it."

"No, nor do I, just now. Still— By the lord Harry! here is just the thing!"

"What is it?"

"Do you remember those mysterious shots that were fired one evening, one into the office of the Break o' Day and the other into Rube Rittens's house?"

"Yes; but what are you driving at?"

"I will explain. That affair, you know, seems to be almost forgotten, and no thought of it has been mentioned in connection with the disappearance of Minnie Denson."

"By heavens! I believe you have hit upon a clew to the mystery of the thing! I had not thought of that."

"Perhaps I have, but I neither know nor care. What I am coming at is this. Suppose Blue-eyed Belle were to turn up missing, and somebody should call attention to those mys-

terious shots, and the fact that one of them was evidently fired at her; would people not jump to the conclusion that the same person who fired the shots had something to do with the strange disappearances?"

"They certainly would."

"Well, it is known that I did not fire them, and if I play my cards with a little skill, may I not escape suspicion altogether?"

"You have hit it exactly! If you can only get the girl into your possession without being discovered, I believe the rest will be easy; and that mysterious Somebody who did the secret shooting will have to shoulder the blame."

"I believe that is my best chance, and I am going to risk it."

For an hour or so the two remained in conversation, and then they parted for the night.

About that same hour—about ten o'clock—news of the missing girl was received at the Dallas mansion.

Colonel Dallas, Mrs. Dallas, Charlie Denson and Kentucky Jean were seated in the library, Mrs. Dallas silently weeping, and the others in conversation regarding the mystery; when suddenly and without warning something came crashing through one of the windows, and fell to the floor.

Colonel Dallas picked it up, while Kentucky Jean sprang out to capture the thrower; but not a sign of any one could be seen, and after a fruitless search of several minutes, the sport returned.

The missile had proved to be a stone, and around it, carefully secured, was a sheet of paper, on which was written the following in Minnie's own hand:

"DEAR MOTHER:—Knowing how anxious you must be, I have begged and obtained leave to send you these few lines, on condition that I do not attempt to let you know where I am. I am well. My detention may be a matter of days, or even of weeks, but my custodian assures me that I am in no danger, and that no harm is intended me. I am well cared for and comfortable. Your loving daughter, "
"MINNIE."

Here was mystery profound.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRANGEST OF ALL.

"FIRE! fire! fire!"

Loud and startling rung out the cry.

It was past the hour of midnight, and Bended Bow, for the most part, was wrapped in peaceful slumber.

But the town was soon aroused.

Rube Rittens had just been awakened by the shouting, when there came a loud knock at his door.

Springing out of bed and throwing up a window, he called:

"Who is there?"

"Come, Rube, come!" was the response; "th' Break o' Day is all ablaze!" and having explained thus briefly, the man turned and ran out and down the street in the direction of the mine.

Rube had recognized him in the semi-darkness as one of the mine's employees, and glancing in the direction of the mine, saw lurid tongues of flame leaping up toward the sky.

Turning back into the room, he hastened to don his clothes and boots, and then threw open his door and sprang down the stairs, out of the house and away, buttoning his coat and adjusting his hat as he ran.

Blue-eyed Belle, awakened about the same time that Rube had been, had heard the words spoken by the man who had stopped on his way to call Rube, who, it will be remembered, was a foreman at the mine, and she, too, had sprung out of bed and raised her window.

"Heavens!" she gasped, "it surely is the mine. And all of Colonel Dallas's horses are stabled there. Oh! I hope they can save them!"

Turning away from the window, she hastily put on her dress and shoes, and by that time Rube had gone down and left the house.

Old Aunt Dinah, in her room on the first floor, now began to call loudly to know what all the excitement was about, and Belle hastened down to close the door, which Rube in his haste had left open, and to reassure the old housekeeper that there was no danger.

"What fo' de Lawd am de matter?" the old woman demanded, as she put her white, woolly head out into the room.

"There's a fire down at the mine," Belle explained, as she closed and secured the door, "and daddy has gone down there."

"Huh! am dat all? By de way he kem r'arin' an' t'arin' down de stairs. I done thought de last trump had blowed, shua!"

After a little persuading, Belle finally got the old woman back into bed, and then she lighted a lamp and sat down to await Rube's return.

Barely two minutes had elapsed when there came a light knock at the rear door—the kitchen door—and stepping out into that room, Belle asked who was there.

"It is I, Charlie," came the reply; "let me in."

"Is it you, Charlie Denson?" Belle took the caution to inquire, in order to hear the voice again.

"Yes, Belle, it is I," in a whispered tone; "open the door, quickly."

Reassured, thinking she recognized the voice of her lover, and her mind filled with the thought that he was bringing further news of Minnie, she having been told of the note so strangely received, she threw open the door.

The next instant she was clasped tightly in the arms of a masked man, who clapped his hand over her mouth and carried her, despite all her struggles, out of the room and out of the yard, by the rear way, as well.

Just outside the yard he was joined by an old woman, a villainous-looking hag, who had a gag all ready, and in a moment the poor girl was securely gagged and bound.

This done, the man delivered her into the woman's charge, with the one word "remember," and then he hastened away in one direction while the old hag forced the girl along with her in the other.

In the mean time Rube Rittens had arrived at the scene of the conflagration.

The fire proved to be in neither the office of the mine, nor the stables, but was madly devouring some old sheds and a pile of lumber that stood near them.

Several men had already arrived, and were doing all they could to subdue the fire and hinder it from spreading to the stables, and Rube sprang into the work like a very tiger.

Ten minutes later, perhaps, Jared Kenneth arrived, almost out of breath, and shortly afterward came Colonel Dallas and Charlie Denson.

Kenneth, like Rube had done, sprang into the work with a will, giving orders and at the same time helping to execute them.

The fire in the lumber was only in the top of the pile, but was spreading rapidly downward, and the buildings near it having fallen down, Kenneth and Rube saw at the same time that quick action would save the greater part of the pile.

There was a ladder near the fence, only a short distance away, and both men ran for it at the same time.

Without a word spoken they carried it and placed it against the pile of lumber, and then climbed quickly to the top.

The sheds having fallen, as stated, the heat was less intense, and it was possible to gain the top of the pile and remain there, though nearly the whole of the upper part of it was wrapped in flame.

Kenneth and Rube understood that both of them were there for one purpose, and immediately they began to lay hold of the blazing boards and fling them as far away as they could, the superintendent at the same time ordering the men below to carry them still further away as they fell.

There, as plainly seen as though it had been midday, the two heroes of the fire were instantly recognized, and a loud cheer was given by the crowd, which was now quite large and was still increasing.

Four or five others soon followed up the ladder, and in a short time the fire was under control, and was finally put out.

And then the crowd dispersed.

Colonel Dallas thanked Jared Kenneth and Rube heartily, and when the danger was all over, returned home, accompanied by Charlie Denson, Kentucky Jean, Willis Stanton and several others who had grouped themselves near him; Charlie and the sport both bearing evidence of the assistance they had lent in extinguishing the fire.

Kenneth and Rube remained some time longer, directing the men in making all as secure as possible against any outbreak, and then after the superintendent had given orders to two of the men to remain all night as extra watchmen, they started back into town, talking over the strange affair as they walked.

"It's a mighty mystery how th' fire was sot," Rube avowed, "unless it was sot a-purpose."

"You are right," Kenneth agreed, "and it must have been set. There are a great many mysterious things happening here of late, Rube. There is no knowing what may happen next."

"That is so. I sha'n't be surprised at anything, now."

And so they talked until they came to the point where Rube turned, and there they said "good-night" and parted.

When Rube reached home a terrible surprise awaited him.

He found the front and side doors both locked, and his knocking brought no one to open them, though he knocked loudly and waited patiently.

Greatly mystified, yet all unsuspecting of the truth, he made his way around to the rear door, which, to his astonishment and alarm, he found standing wide open.

Hastening in, the first object to meet his glance, when he passed from the kitchen to the sitting-room, was the senseless form of his old housekeeper, clad in only her nightgown, lying prone on the floor.

Filled with dismay, the old miner called loudly for Belle, and getting no reply he hurriedly looked the house over to find her.

She was gone.

Almost in despair, then, not knowing what to fear, he next tried to restore the old negress to

consciousness, hoping that she would be able to throw some light upon the mystery.

Quickly obtaining some water, he sprinkled it on her face, and then began to rub her hands and arms briskly.

After a time Aunt Dinah opened her eyes, and then forcing a little liquor into her mouth, Rube soon had the satisfaction of seeing her rapidly recover.

As soon as she could speak, she said:

"Oh! Mars' Rube, Mars' Rube!"

"What is it?" Rube demanded. "Where is Blue eyes?"

As he put the question, he assisted the old woman to her feet and led her to a chair.

"Oh! Mars' Rube," she exclaimed, in faint tones, "she hab been carried off."

"Carried off!"

"Yes, yes, she hab been carried off."

"And who carried her off? Come! tell me all ye know, an' tell me quick!"

"It was jest after you went out to de fire. She done locked de door an' made me go back ter bed, and den she sat down. Den de nex' minute I hear her go inter de kitchen, an' hear her talk to some one, an' I jump up quick ter see who it am. I look out, an' jest den de door fly open an' a big man grab onter Belle, an' den—whuff! an' she am gone."

"My God! and who was th' man? Did ye know him?"

"No, I didn't know him, Mars' Rube, an' he had a big mask over his face, anyhow. Oh! Mars' Rube, can't you go an' done fotch her back? Can't you go an' find her?"

"By th' heavens above, I will find her, old woman; an' God help th' wretch who has dared ter carry her away! I'll find her, if I have ter search th' hull world over!"

Lifting his old housekeeper up, Rube bore her back to her bed, and then telling her to remain there, he left the house by way of the kitchen, securing the door after him.

He went straight to the Dallas mansion, where he rung the bell with such energy that the household was soon aroused again, and in a moment he was admitted by Colonel Dallas himself.

"Good heavens! Rube," the colonel exclaimed, "what has happened?"

"Blue-eyed Belle has been carried off," Rube answered.

"Carried off! When—how?"

"Not an hour ago." And then in few words Rube told his story.

The entire household—servants and all—was present.

"And what is to be done?" demanded the colonel, as Rube concluded.

"What is to be done?" echoed Charlie. "I'll tell you what is to be done: The whole town is to be aroused, and a search made at once! Not a minute is to be lost! Come, Rube," as he caught up his hat, "we must find that girl or die!"

An hour later the whole town was up and astir, and lanterns were seen flashing everywhere.

The excitement of the previous day was begun again, and re-enacted, and, we are obliged to add, with the same result as before.

Blue-eyed Belle, like Minnie Denson, was not to be found.

When morning dawned, and the searchers, all tired and discouraged, returned to town, almost all hope was given up.

It was a mystery no one could fathom.

Colonel Dallas, Charlie Denson, Rube Rittens, Kentucky Jean, Jared Kenneth and several others of those who had been most active in the fruitless quest, met at the hotel, and there the situation was discussed, but no light could be thrown upon the affair.

The case was looked at from every point of view, but no satisfactory explanation could be arrived at.

One thing, however, seemed to be agreed upon, and that was—that there was some connection between these strange abductions and the mysterious pistol-shots of some days previously, and one of the strongest supporters of this theory was Jared Kenneth.

CHAPTER XXX.

BELLE IN CAPTIVITY.

BLUE-EYED BELLE, in the hands of the old woman, or ha, was half-carried and half-dragged to the outskirts of the town.

The woman avoided the streets, and making her way through rear yards and vacant lots, met no one.

When the western limit of the town was reached, she took to a path that led away into the hills, and along that path she hurried her prisoner with all possible speed.

For fully a mile and a half she continued in this direction, and at last came to an old and seemingly deserted house.

Blue-eyed Belle, knowing all the country within a radius of five miles or more, knew very well where she was when the old house was reached.

This old house was one that did not bear a very savory reputation, empty though it was.

Many times it had been used as a headquarters for desperadoes and outlaws of almost every grade, and more than once had the citizens of

the Bow—as Bended Bow was often called—raided it and “cleaned it out.”

Passing as quickly as possible round to the rear, the old hag kicked open a door and forced the girl in. All was dark.

“He! he! he!” she chuckled then. “Here we be, my little beauty, an’ here you’ll stay fer a while, too.”

Being gagged, Belle could not reply.

Pushing the door shut, the old woman, still keeping a tight hold of the girl, felt her way along one side of the room till she came to another door, and that she opened.

“Take keer, now,” she cautioned, “an’ don’t ye stumble an’ make me break my neck, fer there’s a flight o’ steps ahead o’ ye,” and as she uttered the words, she pushed the girl through the door.

For her own safety, Belle followed the advice and did “take keer.”

Stepping with caution she soon found the steps, and with her captor’s hand still tightly gripping her arm, made her way carefully to the bottom.

Being helpless to resist, she knew it was better to obey than run the risk of a fall.

Once at the bottom, the old woman let go of her for a moment and struck a match.

They were in a miserable, dingy hole, for cellar it could hardly be called.

Taking from her pocket a bit of candle, the woman lighted that, and then their surroundings could be more plainly discerned.

On every side were heaps of broken furniture and rubbish of every description.

Waiting a moment for the candle to burn up brightly, the old hag again shoved her helpless prisoner forward and directly toward one of the worst cumbered corners.

“Now ye want ter look where ye’re goin’,” she directed, “an’ climb right over them ‘ar tables, chairs an’ things. It won’t do ye no good fer ter hang back, nuther, fer if ye do I’ll knock ye senseless an’ then *drag* ye where I want ye. Ye’d best go right on now, an’ save trouble.”

As before, Belle chose the wiser course and obeyed.

Stepping carefully, she climbed up and over the pile of rubbish, following the old hag’s directions, and was soon safe on the other side.

Her captor was right behind her, and joined her at once.

Stooping down, the woman reached under a broken table that stood against the wall, and opened a small door.

“Now,” she ordered, “you git down there an’ go through that door.”

This time Belle hesitated.

“Do as I tell ye,” the woman commanded, “or else I will do as I said I would! If ye rile me up I’ll half brain ye! Ye needn’t be ‘fraid, fer I don’t mean ter kill ye, an’ there’s nothin’ in there ter hurt ye. Go on, now!”

Belle saw how helpless she was to defend herself, and resolved to obey.

It was her only choice.

Stooping down as the woman had done she pressed herself through the opening, and the woman followed her and shut the door.

“He, he, he!” the hideous-looking creature laughed, “now you are safe, me lady, now you are safe!”

They were in a small, low-ceilinged sub-cellar now, and there was a floor of boards. In truth the sides and ceiling, too, were of the same. On one side was a small fireplace, with a flue evidently leading into the main chimney of the house. There was no fire.

Besides, there was a table and some chairs, and a bed—or bunk—of boards, on which were some old and dirty blankets.

“Yes, you’re safe now,” the old wretch repeated, “you kin bet you are. Shall I take that gag out of yer mouth fer a minute?” and as she put the question she proceeded to do so.

“You fiend!” Belle cried at once, “why have you brought me here? and who is that man whose wretched hireling you are?”

“There, now, don’t get excited, an’ mebbey you’ll find out all ye want ter know soon enough. I’ve only took this heur gag out fer a minute, so’s ter let ye stretch yer jaws, an’ I’m goin’ ter put it back ag’in, so make use o’ yer time.”

“Why can’t you leave it out?”

“‘Cause ye’ll holler. There’ll be th’ hull town out a-lookin’ fer ye inside o’ an hour, an’ of course they’ll be sure ter come here.

“He, he, he! ye *won’t* holler, though, an’ they won’t find ye. Nobody knows o’ this secret room but me.”

“Can’t I buy my freedom?” Belle asked. “Name your price and let me go, and to-morrow I will pay you.”

“He, he, he! ye want ter buy me, do ye? Well, ye can’t do it. I’m goin’ ter be paid well enough fer keepin’ ye, an’ I won’t trust ye. Ye’d only blab yer story an’ git me inter trouble.”

“No, I promise you I will not. If you will let me go I will give you a hundred dollars.”

“That’s jest what I’m ter git fer keepin’ ye here, an’—”

“Then I’ll give you *five* hundred!”

“No, no, it can’t be done! I’d do it fast enough if it wasn’t fer one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“I’d be killed fer it. My life wouldn’t be worth a wink.”

“But, you could get away, and no one could ever find you.”

“No, no, I tell ye it can’t be done. In th’ first place I wouldn’t trust ye, an’ in th’ next place I’d have ter wait fer th’ money. No, no, I think too much o’ my life ter throw it away that way.”

“Tell me, then, why I have been captured and brought here?”

“Can’t do it; it’s ‘gainst orders.”

“Well, at least you can tell me who it is that is to give you a hundred dollars to keep me here, can you not?”

“No, I can’t. I’m ter say nothin’.”

“Is it the same man who dragged me from the house?”

“Now it won’t do you no good ter be askin’ questions, fer I can’t tell ye nothin’. My orders is ter keep ye here an’ keep ye still, an’ that’s all I’m goin’ ter do. You’ll find out th’ rest some-time.”

“How long do you intend keeping me here?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have ter stay till I’m told ter let ye go.”

“Well, please answer me this one question, and truthfully, and I will ask no more.”

“Well, what is it?”

“You have of course heard, if you belong at Bended Bow, that Minnie Denson was carried away last night.”

“Yes; what of it?”

“Well, this: do you know where she is? and am I in the power of the same person who abducted her?”

“No, I don’t know nothin’ about her, an’ th’ man who hired me to carry you off don’t neither, fer I heard him say so. Now be yer satisfied?”

“You have told me the truth?”

“Yes, I have. Now don’t ask me no more.”

For some moments Belle was silent.

“Well,” the old woman presently said, “I must put this gag inter yer mouth ag’in, so don’t let’s have no kickin’ about it. Orders is orders, ye know. I won’t tie so’s it’ll hurt ye, though, fer ye’ll have ter keep it fer some time. Ye’ve acted so decent in comin’ here, didn’t cut up no tricks, ye know, that I’ve got nothin’ ag’in’ ye, an’ as long as you’ll behave yerself I’ll be easy with ye.”

“Allow me to thank you for that much, anyhow,” Belle responded.

“That’s all right, an’ now hold still till I rig ye out ag’in.”

Being helpless, Belle submitted tamely, and in a few moments she was once more rendered powerless to speak.

“He, he, he!” the old fiend laughed, as she sat down, “when they hires th’ Old Crow ter do a job, she does it well, an’ don’t ye fergit it.

“Why, gal, if you hadn’t come along as peaceful-like as ye did, I’d most killed ye. I’d stood no foolin’, now I tell ye. I would almost brained ye. You’re th’ most sensible young gal I ever had ter deal with.

“Oh! they can’t fool th’ Old Crow. That’s my name, ye see, an’ I’m a terror. I used ter be th’ queen o’ this heur ranch in th’ good old days, but your town-folks got so mighty crusty they couldn’t leave my nest alone. They never got th’ Old Crow, though, you bet! I used ter hide myself away in this secret place, an’ here I was safe. He, he, he!”

And so she rattled on for some time.

At last she arose and shook up the blankets on the rude bed, and then invited Belle to lie down; but the girl preferred to sit up, so the old woman took the bed herself, and feeling sure that her prisoner was quite secure, soon fell asleep.

Blue-eyed Belle still remained seated where she had first sat down, now weeping, and wondering what was to come?

Why had she been brought there? and by whom was she held? Whoever it was, he had used the name of her lover in order to get her to open the door, and hence must be some one who knew him. But, who *could* it be? who—

“Ah!” as her mind flew to one whom she had every reason to suspect, “it is *Jared Kenneth*!”

Then her fears were redoubled, and every minute seemed to her an age.

The candle on the table burned down and went out, plunging the room in darkness, and still she sat there, silent, helpless.

At last the sound of voices was heard, and many heavy steps were heard in the house above.

The searchers spreading out in every direction some of them had arrived there.

As quick as thought came the idea into the girl’s mind: If she could only manage to overturn the table, or in any way make a noise, she might attract attention.

Springing to her feet she was about to carry out the plan, when she felt the claw-like hands of the old hag suddenly seize her, and her voice

hiss: “Don’t ye move, or I’ll strangle ye! If ye make th’ least sound I’ll kill ye!”

With a groan the poor girl sunk down again, the old woman still retaining her hold.

All about overhead the steps were heard, as

the searchers went up-stairs and into every room, and some even came down into the cellar; but Blue-eyed Belle was not to be found, and in a few moments they went away.

Several times this same search was made, by different parties, evidently, but they all searched in vain.

And so the hours of the night dragged slowly away.

When morning came, and the light struggled in through a narrow window near the ceiling, a window that must have appeared innocent from without as being a window to light the cellar; the prisoner was still seated upon the chair, her face pale and her eyes red from constant weeping.

First going out to see that no one was near, the “Old Crow” released the girl’s arms and allowed her to bathe her face, she having brought water for her to do so; and then on Belle’s promising not to call for help, she allowed her the freedom of the room.

The poor girl was willing to promise almost anything, so great was the relief to have the use of hands and tongue, and as long as she did not disobey, she found that the old woman did all for her comfort that she could, as she evidently had instructions to do. She provided something to eat, and tried to make herself as useful and agreeable as possible under the circumstances.

And so wore the day away, and night came on again; and then the old hag told Belle that she might expect a visitor.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JARED KENNETH’S THREAT.

ALL day long Belle had been trying to plan some means of escape.

But she failed. With the evil eyes of the “Old Crow” constantly upon her, she saw how impossible it was.

The day passed and the hours of evening were dragging wearily by, and at last the old woman began to grow sleepy.

For some time she struggled to keep awake, complaining the while at the non-appearance of the expected visitor, but at last she had to surrender.

“Come, gal,” she said, “‘tain’t no use, I’ve got ter go ter sleep. You’ve been free all day, an’ now I’ll have ter tie yer hands. You an’ me understands each other by this time, I guess.”

“Very well,” Belle answered, “you may bind my hands, but please leave that horrid gag out of my mouth.”

“Will ye promise not ter holler?”

“Yes, I promise that.”

“All right, then, I’ll trust ye. If ye *do* holler, though, I’ll half-brain ye, an’ I’ll keep it in yer mouth night an’ day.”

“I will keep silent.”

“Well, it’ll be th’ worse fer ye if ye don’t, that’s sure. Now, if ye want to, ye kin lay down here on th’ bed with me.”

“Thank you, but I prefer to sit up.”

“All right, do jest as ye please; but mind ye, ye don’t want ter cut up no tricks with me.”

With these words the “Old Crow” threw herself upon the bed and was soon asleep.

Now, Belle reasoned, was her chance to escape.

If she could free her hands she might be able to get out of the house without any noise, and once out of the house she could laugh defiance at the old woman.

But could she get her hands free? that was the question.

She made every effort to do so, but the more she struggled the more the cords cut into her wrists, until at last it pained her to move them.

In despair she gave up, bursting into a flood of tears.

Where was daddy? she thought. Would her disappearance not drive him mad? And good old Aunt Dinah, too, would it not almost kill her? And Charlie— Oh! she must, she *must* escape!

Then, despite the pain it caused her, she struggled once more to free her wrists.

But her efforts were all in vain. The old woman had made her secure, and escape was out of the question.

Half an hour later heavy steps were heard in the house, and the “Old Crow” was upon her feet in a moment.

“Hist!” she cautioned, “if ye make one sound I’ll brain ye!”

Belle remained silent.

The steps were heard to cross the floor, and then were heard again as they descended the cellar stair.

When the man reached the bottom of the steps he paused, and then in a half-aloud voice said:

“Old Crow, where are you?”

“That’s him, that’s him,” the old hag muttered, and catching up a fresh candle she lighted it, and then stooped and opened the little door, answering:

“Here I be, right here. Wait a minute, an’ I’ll light ye in.”

“Is the girl there, and all safe?”

“You bet she is! He, he, he! Oh! she’s all safe!”

Making her way through the hole as she utter—

ed the words, she soon appeared in the main cellar, and then directed the man to climb over the pile of rubbish to where she stood.

It was the same man, still masked, who had carried Belle from her home.

He followed the directions of the old woman and soon joined her.

"This is a deuce of a hole!" he growled. "Where is the girl?"

"Stoop down an' go through that hole," the hag directed, "an' ye'll find th' beauty in there, all safe an' sound."

"Well, go on, then, and I'll follow you."

The woman obeyed, and the two crept through and entered the room where Belle was imprisoned.

"Well, Belle," the man remarked, as he sat down, "how are you? and how do you like your present situation?"

"I shall have nothing to say to you," the girl answered firmly, "until I know who you are."

"Well, behold me, then," and he took off his mask.

The face of Jared Kenneth was revealed.

"It is as I thought," Belle declared.

"You thought it was I, did you? What made you suspect me?"

"Because you were the only one I could think of as being capable of so cowardly an act."

The rascal's face flushed slightly.

The next moment he laughed.

"Thank you for the compliment," he said.

"You need not do so."

"Perhaps, since you are so discerning you can understand why I have brought you here."

"I shall not try to guess."

"Well, then I will tell you. I have brought you here to keep you a prisoner until you promise to become my wife."

"Then you will have to keep me here forever!"

"Oh! no, I guess not. I have gone thus far, and now you shall become my wife. If you will not marry me willingly I will force you to do so."

"Never! You may do your worst, and I defy you! If there is no other escape, I will take my life. Marry you—NEVER!"

"You will change your mind, I guess"

"Try me, and see."

"Now, Blue-eyed Belle, see here: Why will you not marry me?"

"Because I hate you."

"A good reason, perhaps, but it does not satisfy me. I could make you learn to love me, in time."

"Never! I despise you utterly!"

"But you love Charlie Denson?"

"You need not ask that."

"No, I suppose not. But, what is he? what is he worth? I own considerable of mining property, while he owns little or none. He has nothing except his salary, which his step-father, Colonel Dallas, allows him to draw out of charity. I am worth dollars to his cents."

"Were he a beggar and you a prince," Belle answered hotly, "I would still despise you. There is no comparison between him and you. He is a man."

"And I am not?"

"No man would do as you have done."

"Well, we will not discuss that point. I love you, and you shall become my wife. If you will marry me, we will go away from here this very night. I will take you to some town where we can find a minister, and you shall be made my lawful wife. Will you do this?"

"I will not."

"Then you shall remain here in this hole, a prisoner, till you consent to my terms."

"Then, as I told you, you will have to keep me here forever."

"Very well, just as you please. And now pay attention to what I say: In four or five days, or a week at most, I shall come to see you again, and then I shall demand your final answer, and that answer will decide my course of action. If you are then willing to marry me, I will be glad to give you the opportunity to do so; but if not, then I shall claim you as my wife without any further ceremony."

"You mean that?"

"I do."

"I believe you; you are capable of any evil. And now bear this in mind: If, by the time you come here again, I have not been rescued from your power, I shall take my own life."

"I do not doubt what you say, but I have no fear of your doing so. Life is too sweet to the young and beautiful. I will risk your taking yours. Besides, here is Old Crow to watch you, and I guess you will find it no easy matter to commit suicide."

"He, he, he! Old Crow is here, you bet! I'll see to it that she don't git no chance ter do no harm to herself. When I hain't got my eyes on her, I'll make sure that her hands is tied. Oh! I'll keep her all safe fer ye, you bet! He, he, he!"

"Yes, keep her hands tied, and if she cuts up rough, just tie her to a chair and keep her there."

After more threats, and after full instructions to the old woman concerning the care she must take of the girl, the cowardly villain left the room and made his way from the house.

Then the girl's courage gave way, and she sunk down upon the floor, sobbing loudly, and begging the old hag to have mercy and allow her to escape.

But she pleaded in vain, and at last, utterly worn out, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HANS WINS THE PRIZE.

EARLY that same evening Euphemia Wiggins, the fair young widow of thirty-nine, was seated alone in her sitting-room, busily engaged at some sort of fancy work.

"Aunt Belinda" had retired to bed, as had also Euphemia's other *protegee*, Mrs. Kent.

The latter's little girl was now growing better, the fever having been broken, and she—the mother—had retired at an early hour in order to obtain much-needed rest.

Euphemia was clad in a neat and pretty dress, had her hair stylishly arranged, and her face fairly shone with cleanliness and anticipation.

This night, this night of all nights in the week, was the night on which her favored suitor, Hans Keppleheim, usually made his call.

Honest, good-natured, smiling Hans; the widow loved him.

Providence, she firmly believed, had at last sent one who was intended to fill the vacant place in her heart and home, and since she was—or felt that she was—a humble instrument to do the will of Providence, she had little choice in the matter.

As the widow went on with her work, she glanced frequently at the clock. The minutes were speeding by, and still her lover had not arrived.

Presently, however, his familiar step was heard, and then came his knock at the door.

With heart all in a flutter, and the roses blushing in her cheeks, Euphemia dropped her work and rose to answer the call.

Throwing open the door, Hans's ruddy face was there.

"Good-evening, mine *tear* Mrs. Wiggins," he exclaimed; "how you vas, hey?" and into the room he rushed, both hands outstretched.

"Why, Mis-ter Kep-ple-heim!" the fair young widow cried joyfully, as she gave him her hands, "is it you? I can't begin to tell you how glad I am to see you! Come right in and sit down. Let me take your hat."

The hat put away, the two sat down.

"Vell, how you vas, anyhow, may pe?" the honest Teuton exclaimed, as he edged his chair up a little nearer.

"Oh! I am very well, I thank you," Euphemia answered, coyly, "I am very well indeed."

"Ya, ya, you looks like you was vell."

"I look as though I am well? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just vat I says. Dere vas roses in your cheeks like der roses in der garten, und dey vas just as schweet, too."

"Oh! Hans, how *can* you?" and the widow blushed deeply.

"Oh! dot vas noddings; you must git used to little dings like dot!"

"But, you are always paying me such compliments."

"Dot vas all righd, you mustn't mind 'em. Dot vas mine vay. I can't help it, somedimes, may pe."

"But you do not mean one-half of them."

"Don't I! I pet your poots I do, den! I means every word vat I says! Id vas dem newspaper fellers vat don't means vat dey says, und dey vas no good."

"Pray do not mention them."

"Vy? don't you likes 'em?"

"Not half so well as I like *you*."

"Dot vas right!" edging his chair a little nearer, "dot vas vat I likes to hear! Dey vas no good for anydings but fighting, und dey vasn't any good at dot. I hope dey kills der-selves to-morrow."

"You hope they will kill themselves to-morrow!"

"Ya, ya, I hope dey shoots der lungs clear out."

"Why, are they going to shoot a each other to-morrow?"

"Ya! didn't you heard all apout id?"

"No, not even a word."

"Vell, vell! den I must tell you all apout id."

"Yes, pray do so."

"Dey vas goin' to fight a tuel mit revolvers, und—"

"Oh! that will be horrible!"

"No, id vill pe yust righd; und I hopes dey villshoot der-selves all full mit holes, den dey can't come foolin' rount *here* any more."

"Why Hans! I really believe you are getting jealous!"

"In course I vas! Dot vas mine vay. You mustn't mind a little ding like dot."

"And not the slightest cause to be so, eith r But, tell me all about the duel."

"Ya, ya, I must tell you all apout dat. Id vas a big ding on ice, you pet! Dey vas goin' to stand in der windows of der offices, an' shoot righd across der street at der-selves, an' so commit suicide mit der-selves. Oh! id vill pe bully, if dey vill only make a sure job of id."

"Oh! you are dreadful!"

"No I vasn't, not a pit of it; id vill pe yust

righd! I hopes dey vill plow der pig vooden heads off!"

"But, why do you wish them such bad luck?"

"Dot vasn't pad luck, dot is vat dey vands ter do; und I hopes dey vill git all dey vants, und more pesides."

"But, *why* do you wish it?"

"Pecause so dey can't come to see you any more. I don't likes to seen 'em come here."

"There! I *knew* you were jealous!"

"Dot vas all righd, like I told you."

"And why don't you like to see them come here?"

"Pecause dey vas no good, und pecause I likes you und vants you all py mineself."

"Do you really like me, Hans?" and the shy young thing dropped her eyes.

"Do I really *likes* you?" cried Hans, and with a sudden movement he brought his chair right up side by side with hers; "vy, mine *tear* Mrs. Wiggins, I *loves* you!"

"Oh! you do not mean it—you are only joking."

"No, I vasn't choking, neither; id vas so."

"And you really, *really* love me?"

"You pet your poots I do! Vhy, I can't pe-gin to tell you how I love you."

The widow dropped her eyse again and leaned a little toward her lover.

"I am glad you love me," she cooed.

"You vas glad I loves you? So vas I. I vas yust as glad as could pe. But vhy vas *you* glad, hey?"

"Because I—I—I love you, too."

"Vat! you love me already so gwick? Oh! how happy I vas, maype!" and as he uttered the words the big-hearted Teuton threw open his arms and caught the widow to his breast, giving her a hug that almost made every bone in her body crack.

Euphemia returned the embrace to the best of her ability, and then, for some reason or other, their faces met—not only once or twice, but half a dozen times or more in succession.

"Oh! how happy, how happy I vas!" exclaimed Hans.

"And so am I!" Euphemia echoed.

"Und you vill pe my vife?" Hans asked earnestly, "mine own *tear* leetle vife? Oh! Mrs. Wiggins, tell me dot you vill pe mine."

"Yes, dear Hans," Euphemia replied, "I will. I love you dearly and I will be yours."

Then came another vigorous hug.

"Now," cried Hans, presently, "I don't care vwhether dey kills der-selves or not! I means dem two editor fellers. If dey comes round here mit deir foolishness, py heavens—"

A knock at the door.

All in a flurry Euphemia sprung up and smoothed down her hair, and with face all-aflame, went to answer it.

There stood General Orrion Wade.

"Good-evening, my dear Mrs. Wiggins," he said; "may I come in?"

"G—good-evening, general," the widow responded falteringly; "yes, please walk in."

The general did so, greeting Hans warmly when he saw he was there, a greeting to which Hans responded rather coolly.

Barely had the general seated himself and begun to talk, when there came another knock.

"That hound of a Miles, I'll wager!" the general exclaimed.

Euphemia went again to the door, and sure enough, there stood Major Theobald Miles.

"My dear Mrs. Wiggins," he said, "how do you do? May I enter?"

"G—good-evening, major," even more falteringly than before: "y—yes, come in."

The major entered, greeting Hans as the general had done, but paying no attention to the general whatever; and Hans responded even more coolly than before.

The major sat down, and then Euphemia resumed her seat near Hans—not quite so near as previously, but nearer than had ever been usual.

For half an hour or so the two journalists chatted away pleasantly, each trying to excel the other, but never speaking to each other.

At last, when there was a momentary pause, Hans Keppleheim said:

"Say, you two fellars, I s'bose you remembers already vat I told you pefore sometime, don't it? dot ven one mans goes to see one vomans it vas a pully time; but ven dree or four vas dere id vas n. g. Dot is yust vat's de matter mit Han-ner here."

"Well, my dear fellow," answered the general, "we are not keeping you here; you may go at once if you like."

They remembered the former occasion.

"Ya, ya, dot vas all righd," Hans rejoined, "but I have yust asked Mrs. Wiggins to pe mine vife, und she have said she vill; so maype id vas you fellars vat petter pe goin', ain't id?"

"Is this true?" exclaimed both his rivals at once, turning to the widow.

Euphemia admitted that it was.

"Then allow me to congratulate you both!" and speaking at once, both sprung up and shook the happy couple warmly by the hands.

Hans and Euphemia were more than surprised. Such action as this from rival lovers seemed impossible. Nevertheless it remained a fact. And

it being impossible for us to repeat in full all that was said, we will simply pass over the point with the statement that in due time, after heartily congratulating the couple, the two journalists took their leave, promising to give public notice of the event next day.

Not a word was said about the impending duel.

After Hans and his bride-elect had got their chairs close together again, Hans asked her to name "the day," and, after due consideration the wedding-day was finally agreed upon.

Hans had carried his point and won the prize, and was happy.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE GREAT DUEL.

THE day of the great duel between the editor of *The Bow* and the editor of the *The Arrow* was at hand.

Arrangements had been made soon after the challenges had been accepted on both sides, and a full programme had been published in both papers.

A small shelf-like platform had been put up just outside the window of each editorial sanctum, and upon these the duelists were to stand.

Their offices were directly opposite each other, on the second floor as we have explained, and this plan would give the public a fine view.

No steps had been taken to prevent the affair, because few believed that the two men were in earnest; but nevertheless when the appointed hour drew near the street became crowded with spectators and it was not long before the people began to hoot and yell for the fun to begin.

Waiting until the excitement was at a high pitch, the major and the general at last stepped out upon their respective platforms, revolver in hand.

And then the cheer that went up from the crowd was deafening.

The duelists bowed right and left, and then each glared at the other most ferociously.

"Hello! you whining cur, you brindled pup!" cried the major, "you *are* there, are you? I didn't think you'd have the sand to show yourself."

"Why, is that you, you braying jackass?" the general returned; "I'm surprised! I expected I would have to step out here and make a show of myself for nothing. I'm glad to see you."

"Oh! but I'll do you up, you villain!" roared the major.

"Look out you don't get done up yourself!" bellowed the general.

"No fear of that," the major shouted back, "You couldn't hit a barn-door."

"And you couldn't hit a barn, door and all!" the general hurled back again.

"I'll show you what I can hit, you—you—you bald-headed old sinner!"

"Yes, and I'll show *you*, you—you—you hump-backed old fraud."

"Ba-a-ah!"

"Ba-a-ah!"

And then they shook their weapons at each other vigorously, while the crowd howled itself hoarse.

Waiting a moment, and examining his revolver carefully (the general doing the same), the major presently called out:

"Well, you old liar, are you ready?"

"Yes, you old thief," the general replied.

"I'm ready. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let her go."

They had no seconds, and as soon as the general said "let her go," they both took quick aim and fired.

Two spiteful reports rung out, but neither man flinched.

"Did I hit you?" inquired one.

"No. Did I you?"

"No!"

"I'll fetch you this time."

"Yes, and so will I. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let her go!"

Again both fired, but the effect was not fatal. Both stood unscathed and firm.

"Bah!" cried the major, "you don't even hit the building!"

"Bah yourself!" shouted the general, "you couldn't hit a mountain."

"I'll show you, you old blower."

"Yes, and I'll show *you*, you coward!"

"Are you ready?"

The answer was the same as before, and both blazed away again, and not only one shot each, but two or three in succession.

And still no harm was done.

The crowd yelled and cheered immensely.

"Get a gun," one would yell.

"Aim at his nose," cried another, and a hundred such directions were heard in a breath.

"Oh, you old sneak!" yelled the major, "if I come over there I'll fix you!"

"Yes, you old fool! and if I come over there I'll fix *you*!" returned the general.

"Why don't you come?"

"Why don't *you* come?"

"Bah!"

"Ba-ah!"

And then "ba-a-ah" came from the crowd.

Just where the affair would have ended, it is

hard to tell, but at that moment the platform on which General Wade was standing suddenly gave way, and down he went to the street below.

The fall was not very great, the second story being not very high and the platform being a little lower than the window, but it was great enough, and the general went down with such force that he was rendered insensible.

Seeing their danger, the crowd had cleared a space for him, and he struck the ground with full force.

"Oh! my God!" cried the major, at once, and in haste he clambered up into his window.

A moment later he appeared at the door below, and then pushed his way across the street.

"Hol' on, thar, major!" some one exclaimed, as he came near to where the general lay, "you can't get at th' man while he's down!"

"Stand aside, friend, and let me get to him," the major said hastily, as he attempted to get past the man.

"No, ye don't! That man's down, an' this crowd ain't goin' ter see no foul play."

"But, my friend, I don't want to harm him; I want to see how badly he is hurt!"

"That's a likely story, after th' enemies ye've been. Ain't I right, boys?"

"Yes, yes," from the crowd, "you are right, keep him away."

"But, gentlemen," urged the major, "I *must* get to him! He may be fatally injured."

"An' what if he is? Wasn't you just now tryin' ter plug a bullet inter him?"

"In course he was! He wants ter take him foul while he's down!"

"No, no, my friends, I mean him no harm. I see I am forced to tell you the truth. *He is my brother.*"

"Your brother! Oh! that's too thin! An' you two fightin' a duel?"

"Yes, with blank cartridges."

This was a settler. Some in the crowd had partly guessed the truth, but to the most of them the revelation came like a flash, and they saw through the whole thing.

Laughter, groans, cheers, hoots and hisses were heard on every hand, and the "major" was allowed to make his way to his brother's side.

The "general" was not hurt very badly, and in a short time he came to.

The first person he beheld on opening his eyes was the "major."

"Oh! you miserable dog!" he exclaimed, "I'll fix you for this! I'll—"

"The secret is out," interrupted the "major," with a smile, "so we may as well abandon our little pleasantries," and he assisted the fallen "general" to rise.

Then followed their explanation.

They were brothers, and printers by trade.

In coming to Bended Bow to start a newspaper, they had conceived the idea of starting *two* instead of one, and then to become bitter enemies and pitch into each other regardlessly. If they could make their editorial attacks upon each other popular with the public, there was a fortune for them. And they had made them popular beyond their wildest dreams.

That afternoon the papers contained the story in full, and the editors, thanking the public for the favor and appreciation they had received, begged leave to inform their readers that within a short time the two papers would be merged into one, which would be called—"The Bow and Arrow." And they promised to make the paper as lively and entertaining in the future, in one way or another, as the two had been in the past.

The pretended feud was a thing of the past.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

THE evening of yet another day came, and still neither Blue-eyed Belle nor Minnie Denson had been found. Every effort had been made, but all to no purpose.

And now another disappearance was reported.

The strange woman, "Aunt Belinda," who lived with Euphemia Wiggins, was missing, and could not be found. She had been seen early in the afternoon, but after that no trace of her could be discovered.

In her case though there was no suspicion of foul play. When Euphemia told about her strange conduct of late, it was believed that she had wandered away from home, and had become lost somewhere in the hills.

The fact of her having been found wandering aimlessly about in distant parts of the town on several occasions within a short time, confirmed this. Euphemia spent all the afternoon and a part of the evening in looking for her, but all to no purpose.

Late in the evening Willis Stanton went up to Jared Kenneth's room in the hotel, and the two sat down to have a talk over matters of interest.

"That was an almighty clever trick of yours, Jared," Stanton remarked, after a pause in their conversation; "it was well done. No one could suspect you at all. I was puzzled myself when I heard the girl was missing, for I saw you at the fire working like sixty. It was well done."

"Yes, I flatter myself it was. As soon as I thought of fire I had the key to the whole thing. I got one of the boys to set the fire, you know,

and another was all ready to call Rube out as soon as the alarm was given, while I lay in waiting to get at the girl. I lost no time, and as soon as I turned her over to the Old Crow I started on a run to the fire. It couldn't have been worked better."

"You are right. When are you going to see the girl again?"

"I am going to-night, and that is why I wanted to see you. I want you to do me a favor."

"Name it."

"It is this: If I am missed from town, even for a short time, it is possible that suspicion may fall upon me, and I don't want to be missed. I want you to do me the favor to remain here in my room for two hours or so, as though I were here. You can read, smoke, or whatever you like. Will you do it?"

"Yes, I'll do it, but suppose some one sees you when you go out, how then?"

"No one will see me to know me, for I shall wear this false beard, and besides that I shall leave the room by the window instead of by the door."

"Oh! I see. What if the girl still refuses, though?"

"In that case I shall use force with her and bend her to my will. She shall be mine this night!"

"And after that? Will she not make it warm for you?"

"Do you see this paper?" and as he spoke Kenneth drew from his pocket a small, neatly folded document, and opened it. It was the marriage certificate of Delwin Mourtou and Sibyl Gernett—the paper lost by Blue-eyed Belle.

"Yes," answered Stanton, "I see it."

"Well, this is the key to the whole plot. I shall force the girl to go with me to Mexico, and there sign such papers as will give to me a legal right to all her interests in that Denver mine. Once I get that, then I care not what comes. And I can get it, too. With this one document, her signature and a good lawyer, I am sure of success."

"I cannot see just how you would do it, but no doubt where there is a will there is a way, and I suppose you would 'get there.'"

"You can bet I would! When I set my mind at work on a point, I generally gain my object."

And so ran the conversation for half an hour or more, and then Kenneth donned his disguise and left the room via a window, leaving Stanton to carry out the deception as planned.

Barely five minutes had the rascal been gone when heavy steps were heard in the hall, and the proprietor threw open the door far enough to admit his head, and exclaimed:

"Mister Genneth, dere vas a voman's vat vants ter speak mit you, und she wouldn't go away, und—"

"And here I am!" and flinging the door wide open, a woman sprung into the room.

It was the Mrs. Annie Kent who was stopping at the home of the Widow Wiggins.

"Where is the man who calls himself 'Jared Kenneth?'" she demanded, her eyes flashing and nostrils dilating; "where is he?"

Willis Stanton stood for an instant almost spellbound. Where had he seen this woman before? Who was she?

"Mr. Kenneth has stepped out for a moment," he managed to reply.

"This is his room, is it?" the woman inquired.

"It is."

"Then I will wait for him," and she sat down.

Hans Keppleheim's face was the picture of dismay, and with a muttered—"I couldn't help it"—he went away, leaving Stanton in a worse dilemma than ever.

"You are Mr. Kenneth's friend, I suppose," the woman remarked.

"I am," Stanton answered.

"Do you know that Kenneth is not his name?"

"No, I was not aware of it. Pardon me, but may I inquire who you are?"

"Certainly; my name is Mrs. Annie Kent. I am the wife of John Kent—him whom you know as 'Jared Kenneth.'"

"Good heavens!" as he sprung to his feet, "can it be true? What was your maiden name?"

"Annie Gray."

"My God! you are my sister!"

"Your sister!" as she, too, sprung from her chair; "what is *your* name?"

"Here I am known as Willis Stanton. I am Willis Stanton Gray."

"Oh! my brother!" and in an instant they were in each other's arms.

Explanations were soon made. Annie's story, as she told it to Euphemia Wiggins, the reader of course remembers. In it she made mention of a brother Willis whom she had not seen for years. Willis, at an early age, had gone away from home, after a quarrel with his father, and had never been seen by Annie since. After a number of years' absence he had returned to Denver, there to learn of the death of both his father and mother, and the marriage of his sister. Her he had tried to find, but without success. He learned the name of her husband, John Kent, but had never met him, and of course he and "Jared Kenneth" knew naught of each other, since Willis had dropped the name of

Gray, owing to an unpleasant affair in which he had once acted a part.

When Annie concluded her story, Willis, pale with rage, cried:

"The villain! he shall answer to me for what he has done! Was it not enough to desert you? that he stole the certificate of your marriage, and left you to the scorn of the world, driving our father to the grave and depriving his child of her rightful name? Oh! but he shall answer for it all! And that little girl, the one who came that night into the bar-room, was his child and yours. Oh! the coward—the dog! he shall pay for his work!"

"No, not to you, Willis, but to me. He shall be made to remove the brand of shame that now rests upon me and my child."

"Yes, that he shall do. I swear it!"

"I would have come ere this, but my little girl has been so ill I could not leave her. Now that I can leave her, I am here to demand my rights."

"And— But, good Heavens! I must be after him at once. Even now he is planning to wrong an innocent girl—the belle of the place—and I, miserable, cowardly wretch that I am, am lending him my help!"

"Then you must save her! Fly at once to her rescue, and undo the evil you have begun!"

"Yes, yes; I will go at once and tell her friends where to find her, and send them to the rescue. Then—"

Many heavy and rapid steps were heard, then came a loud knock, and opening the door Willis came face to face with Kentucky Jean, Charlie Denson, Rube Rittens and Colonel Dallas.

"Where is Jared Kenneth?" the sport demanded.

"He is out," Willis answered. "Did you want to see him?"

"Would we be here if we didn't? We believe he is the one who is accountable for Blue-eyed Belle's disappearance!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SURPASSING STRANGE.

WILLIS STANTON was surprised, wondering how the sport had learned the truth, but he said: "Your suspicion is well founded; Jared Kenneth is the guilty man."

"And where is he now?"

"He has gone to visit the girl where he has her imprisoned."

"My God!" cried Charlie Denson; "we must fly at once to the rescue! Where is she?"

In a few words Willis explained and confessed all.

"You deserve to be shot!" cried the sport, with passion. "I hope your confession may save the girl from harm. If not—"

"If not," interrupted Charlie, hotly, "you shall answer to me for the part you played!"

No time was lost, and the five—for Willis accompanied them—set out for the old house where Blue-eyed Belle was being detained.

A few words will explain how Kentucky Jean came to learn the facts that led him at once to suspect Kenneth. The Widow Wiggins, knowing that the sport was an active leader in the search for the two missing girls, went to him to ask his help in looking for Aunt Belinda, and while in conversation with him told him the strange woman's story, as she had intended to do when she learned it was he who had advertised for Delwin Mourtou—the mention of whose name had affected the woman so strangely. The sport questioned her closely, and promised his aid. Then came out the story of the other woman—Annie Gray—and the fact that Kenneth was her husband. Skillful questions, then, brought out all the facts, and they caused the sport to suspect Kenneth at once.

As soon as the men started, Annie Kent returned to the widow's house, there to find that "Aunt Belinda" had not yet returned and Euphemie in tears.

As they hastened out of town and bent their steps toward the old house in the hills, the five men talked over the business in hand.

Willis told the whole story, giving Kenneth's evil schemes in full, and Colonel Dallas could hardly believe the facts—especially regarding the recent fire.

When they neared their destination, the sport said:

"Would it not be well to approach the house as silently as possible? If we are heard, there is no knowing what the rascal will do. He may take the girl's life."

"That is just what he will attempt, when he finds himself cornered," the cashier declared.

Various plans were then discussed, and it was decided that only three should enter the house—Kentucky Jean, Charlie Denson and Willis—and that they were to remove their boots before doing so, in order not to make any noise. Colonel Dallas and Rube Rittens were to remain outside. Willis, having had a description of the secret room from Kenneth, was to lead the way. And this arrangement was carried out.

All became silent as they drew near, and at the rear door the chosen three removed their boots, and then noiselessly pushed the door open and went in.

In the mean time Jared Kenneth had arrived, though barely a quarter of an hour previously;

and when the three rescuers descended to the cellar, his voice was heard.

"Then you flatly refuse to marry me?" he was saying.

"Yes, you coward!" came the firm reply. "I do."

"Then you know the consequence."

Belle did not reply, and her three friends made all haste consistent with silence to reach the secret door, lighting their way by means of matches.

A moment of silence, and then the villain's steps were heard, as he evidently crossed the room toward the terrified girl, and at the same moment Belle screamed loudly for help.

"Help! help! help!" she shrieked.

Help was at hand. Instantly the little door was flung open, and, revolver in hand, Charlie Denson sprang through into the room, closely followed by the sport and Willis.

"Stand back, you dog!" were Charlie's first words; "stand back, or you die!"

"And throw up your hands," added the sport, "or you'll die anyhow!"

Baffled, pale, trembling in every limb, the wretch shrunk back and raised his hands.

The next moment he beheld Willis Stanton, and gasped:

"Ha! you traitor, this is your work!"

"Yes, John Kent," Willis answered, "it is my work; it is the work of vengeance for the wrong you have done my sister."

"W-what-how—"

"Do you know who I am? I am Willis Gray, a brother to Annie Gray! Ah! well may you cringe and draw back; the hand of vengeance is about to crush you, you dog!"

As soon as the sport had covered the villain, Charlie sprang to Blue-eyed Belle and released her; and when Willis had spoken as above, the sport directed him to step forward and bind the prisoner's hands, which he willingly did. And then all left the miserable den and made their way out of the house.

"Oh! daddy!" Belle cried, as she threw herself into old Rube's arms, and with a fervent "Thank God!" the old man pressed her to his honest heart. The next moment he turned like an enraged lion upon Kenneth, and but for the others it would undoubtedly have fared ill with him. As it was, Charlie and the colonel succeeded in calming him, and all proceeded to town.

Little was said on the way, except by Charlie and Belle, who walked some distance ahead of the others.

It was past the hour of midnight when they reached town, and as they returned by way of the main trail instead of the by-path we have mentioned, they came out near the Blue Stone Canyon at the point where the old canyon trail reached the surface. The town was silent, almost, and just as they were passing this point, they were all startled by hearing a terrible cry.

"Help! help!" rung out loud and clear, in a woman's voice, from the depths of the canyon.

"My God!" gasped Belle, "who can it be? Go! Charlie, go at once to the rescue!"

All had stopped to listen, and presently the cry was heard again.

"That are some woman in distress, sure!" declared Rube Rittens. "Come, Kentuck, let's you an' me slip down thar an' see what's up."

"You'd better let Charlie go in your place, Rube," said Colonel Dallas. "Don't forget we've got a prisoner with us."

"Mebby you're right, colonel. I didn't stop ter think. Yes, Charlie, you an' Kentuck hear go an' see what's th' racket down there."

"All right," responded Charlie, and then he and the sport hastened away down the trail, while the others went on.

Colonel Dallas and Belle went at once to the colonel's house, leaving Rube and Willis to conduct Kenneth to the jail, and after they had seen him safely locked up they parted, Willis going home and Rube to the colonel's.

Meanwhile, Charlie and the sport had hurried along down the canyon with all the speed consistent with safety, and presently they reached the point where the woman was. It was so dark, though, that nothing could be seen, and Charlie asked:

"Who is there?"

"Who are you?" came the counter-query.

"We are two men who heard your cries and who have come to help you. What can we do?"

"Thank Heaven you are friends! My husband has just attempted to push me over the ledge, and has left me here, and now I cannot find my baby, which I left here close to the wall, only a moment ago. Have you a match?"

They had, and lighting one each, they looked at the woman who stood before them.

That woman was the lost "Aunt Belinda."

The truth flashed upon Kentucky Jean in an instant, and he asked:

"What is your name, madam?"

"My name," was the reply, "is Mrs. Delwin Mourtou."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

CHARLIE DENSON'S surprise was unbounded, but that of Kentucky Jean was far less great. In fact, on hearing Euphemie Wiggins's story,

he had formed a strong suspicion that "Aunt Belinda" was the lost Sibyl Gernett. And so it now proved to be.

"Was your maiden name Sibyl Gernett?" the sport asked next.

"It was," was the reply. "But, pray help me to find my child."

"Certainly," the sport responded, giving his companion a nudge to warn him to follow his cue; "we will look for it."

Lighting another match, he took a newspaper and rolled it up and ignited it, thus lighting up the whole scene. No child, however, was to be found nor any signs of one.

The reader, of course, understands the strange situation. "Aunt Belinda's" memory had at last awakened, but evidently at the expense of all knowledge of the second period of her life; and she was taking up the first period again at the very point where it had been lost to her. The child she was looking for was, beyond a doubt, Blue-eyed Belle.

"My God!" the woman cried, "she has fallen into the canyon! Oh! my poor child!" And she wrung her hands in despair.

"Perhaps not," the sport encouraged. "Some one may have picked it up; perhaps your husband took it. Did you say he attempted to push you into the canyon?"

"Yes, and— Oh! no doubt he did throw the child down there! Oh! my poor babe, it is lost, lost!"

"Do not despair," said the sport, "it may be found alive and well. If you will come with us to town we will try and find it. Will you come?"

"Yes, I'll go anywhere to find my child."

The three made their way out of the canyon then, and entered the town.

"Is this the town called Bended Bow?" the woman asked in surprise; "I thought it was but a young town."

"Yes, this is the place, madam."

"It is strange, strange."

In due time they arrived at the Dallas mansion, and entered, the woman silently weeping for the loss of her child.

Colonel Dallas, Mrs. Dallas, Rube Rittens and Blue-eyed Belle were in the drawing-room, and thither Charlie led the way.

The face of Colonel Dallas turned pale, as the sport instantly noticed, but he calmly said:

"Oh! it was poor Aunt Belinda, was it? I am glad she is found."

At the words the woman staggered back, her eyes dilating wildly, and pressed her hands to her head.

"That name, that name," she whispered half-aloud; "where have I heard it?"

"Poor soul!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas, "she is excited. Had we not better send for Mrs. Wiggins?"

"Who is she?" the woman demanded quickly.

Kentucky Jean explained, and in such a way as to turn her mind both to the past and the present of her life; and ere he had done the woman cried out:

"Oh! my God, my God! Now I see it all! It is my horrible dream—my haunting dream! and that dream is the truth." And with a groan she sunk down upon a chair.

"Tell me," she presently asked, "what year is this?"

She was told.

"Oh! too—too true. Little wonder," turning to the sport and Charlie—"little wonder the thunderstorm has passed, and that the waters in the canyon are making less noise to-night, for this night to me is just eighteen years ago."

"Poor woman!" said Blue-eyed Belle in sympathy, "some horrible trouble has been yours."

"And you understand why I called you 'Aunt Belinda'?" asked Mrs. Dallas.

"Yes, yes, I understand it all; the past as well as the present is now made clear."

"Knowing your true name," said Kentucky Jean, "allow me to hand you this;" and as he spoke he gave her the lost marriage-certificate, which he had taken from Jared Kenneth.

"Merciful heaven!" she cried, "it is the certificate of my marriage! Where was it found?"

"Ask him," and the sport pointed to Rube Rittens.

"Tell me, sir, oh! tell me if you know; where this was found?" and the woman turned to Rube and held the paper up for him to see.

All present recognized it at once.

"That, ma'am," Rube explained, "was found by me in Blue Stone Canyon eighteen years ago."

"And the child?" in an almost scream, "what of the child?—for this paper was pinned beneath her clothes!"

"That child, ma'am," Rube answered, "his voice trembling and tears springing into his eyes, 'stands there.' And his finger indicated where."

Belle took a hasty step forward, paused, the eyes of mother and child met for one brief instant, and then sobbing aloud their joy they sprang into each other's arms.

There was not a dry eye in the room, and Colonel Dallas, as he drew back from the group and sunk upon a chair, covered his face with his hands, while his frame shook convulsively.

"But, my father? tell me of him," Blue-

eyed Belle requested, still in her mother's fond embrace.

"Alas!" was the response, "it is best that you do not learn the truth."

"And why? Is he living? or dead?"

"I do not know. If living, I hope he is living the life of an honest and honored man. But good heavens! it just comes to me that *you* are not my only child; you have a twin brother, if he is alive."

Colonel Dallas looked up quickly, and Belle exclaimed:

"I have a twin brother? Oh! tell me something about him."

"Yes, tell us your story," added Mrs. Dallas.

"I will do so. As this certificate shows, I was married to Delwin Mourton, at Denver, on the 10th of May, 1863. At that time my father, James Gernett, owned a rich mine, but soon after my marriage his mine began to fail, and he lost his fortune and died, and then my husband deserted me. Not long after that I gave birth to twins, in the home of the Mrs. Gray whose name is signed here as one of the witnesses to my marriage.

"About a year after that I heard of my husband at Bended Bow, and set out to find him. I left one of my children with a friend, a widow who had been my father's housekeeper, and took the other with me. It was summer, and I set out on foot, asking my way of all whom I met, and one night, following the directions of a man whom I had asked to direct me, I found myself in a dismal canyon. A terrific thunderstorm was coming on, and far below me I could hear the rush of waters, which grew louder and louder as the storm drew near. Tired out, I laid my child down for a moment to rest my arms, and then I heard steps coming, and the next moment a man ran against me in the darkness.

"The man wanted to know where I was going, and I recognized his voice instantly. It was my husband. I caught his arm, begging him to lead me out of the dark canyon to a place of safety; but before I could finish, or speak of my child, he, with a curse, pushed me to throw me over the ledge, and I knew no more.

"Of what followed, you know as much as I, no doubt; how I was given up by a band of Indians to a party of whites, and how I have lived since. It must be that I fell to the river in the canyon, was carried along in some manner, and that the Indians saved me."

Such was her story, and all listened in close attention.

When she concluded, Kentucky Jean asked:

"What means did you provide for the identification of your other child, Mrs. Mourton, when you left it with your friend, the widow?"

"Alas! I fear I left but little, because I certainly expected to return to claim him. On my arm, however, is a peculiar birth-mark, and that mark was exactly reproduced by nature upon the arm of each of my children."

"And that mark—what was it?" asked the sport, unable to conceal the agitation he felt.

"It is a small, red spot in the form of a star."

"My God! I have just such a mark upon my right arm!" and with the words the sport threw off his coat and bared his arm; "I believe that I am your child!"

"And the same mark is upon *my* arm, and in the same place," declared Belle.

"Then you are indeed my children! Oh! my God, what happiness! If your father were only here to—"

A loud groan drew every eye to Colonel Dallas. His face, pale and drawn, was twitching with suppressed emotion.

"Their father is here," he gasped. "I, coward and villain that I have been and am, *am Delwin Mourton!*"

Then, ere any one could interfere, or guess his purpose, he drew a knife and plunged it into his breast.

"Good-by," he gasped. "I do not ask to be forgiven; forget me if you can." And with the words he sunk bleeding to the floor.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MINNIE DENSON FOUND.

LIMITED space forbids our repeating in detail all that occurred after the terrible *denouement*.

A doctor was sent for at once, and when he arrived he announced that Colonel Dallas had but a short while to live.

Meanwhile the dying man had made a confession to those around him. His sole end and aim in life had been to gain wealth. He had married Sibyl Gernett solely that he might gain possession of her father's mine. The mine failing, he deserted her to seek wealth elsewhere. Coming to Bended Bow, he made the acquaintance of Philip Denson, who owned a rich mine, and he resolved to lay plans to gain possession of it. He was now known as Colonel Damon Dallas, and a full beard served him as a disguise. Returning from Denver one day, by the then weekly stage, he left the stage at the point where the canyon trail shortened the distance to the town, and started up the canyon on foot. In the canyon he came upon his wife as she had described, and in anger and passion hurled her down into the roaring river below. Of his child he knew

nothing then, but later, when the babe was found by Rube Rittens, he knew that it must be his; and he it was who had visited Aunt Dinah that night, and he it was who had supplied the monthly twenty dollars ever since.

Furthermore, he confessed to having forged a will purporting to be the last will of Philip Denson, in which everything was left to Mrs. Denson, in order that, could he win the widow's hand in marriage, he would come into full possession of the property. And in this scheme we have shown how well he succeeded. He told where the true will could be found, a will in which the property had been equally divided between the two children, Charles and Minnie, with the reservation that the widow should have, own and control one-half of all the income from the whole during her life.

After the arrival of the doctor, Kentucky Jean—or Jean Mourton, to give him his *true* name—asked:

"May I ask you all to leave the room for a moment? I have a question of the utmost importance to ask my father in private."

Without a word all obeyed.

"Father," Jean asked, kneeling beside him, "will you answer one question, and truthfully?"

"Yes," was the faint reply, "I will."

"It is this: *Did you murder Daniel Erving?*"

"My God!" the dying man gasped, "am I not punished enough?"

"Speak, father, the truth."

"My son, *I did*. Daniel Erving knew that I had forged Philip Denson's will, and was determined to expose me. In order to carry out my plans I killed him. Oh! may God be merciful to me—a murderer!"

Those were his last words. His head fell back, and the blood gushed from his lips.

Jean rose to his feet and called to the others to return to the room, and when they entered they found Delwin Mourton gasping his last, and Jean standing over him, his face buried in his hands and his hot tears flowing fast.

To them that last great secret was never revealed.

The story of the past—of Jean—was told later, after the first shock of death had passed. His earliest recollections were of living with a widow at Denver, a Mrs. Grantley, and he was called Jean Grantley. This, his mother corroborated, was the woman in whose care she had left him. When he was about seven or eight years of age Mrs. Grantley died, and he was left to care for himself as best he could. He became newsboy, bootblack, errand boy and anything else by which he could earn an honest living, until at last, at the age of fourteen, he was engaged as office boy, etc., in the office of a detective agency. There he gradually worked himself along until at last he won a place on the regular staff as a detective.

His pseudonym of "Kentucky Jean" was one he had chosen for one of his "character creations, though in that character he was seen in *propria persona*; and the explanation he gave of the name, and of his coming from Yellow Pine, Cal., were but bits of fiction to support his story.

But of him more anon.

At an early hour next day Jean made his way into the presence of Incognita, the Faro Queen. She had already learned all that had been made public of the events of the night, and was in an agitated stage of mind.

"Incognita," the sport said sorrowfully, "I am here to give you the answer to your question."

"Heaven help me!" she gasped, as pale and trembling she stood before him; "I fear I read it in your face."

"I believe you do. An insurmountable barrier has arisen between us, and even were I to answer 'yes' to your request, you would spurn me from you, for I, Jean Mourton by rightful name, am the son of Delwin Mourton; or in other words, *I am the son of your father's murderer.*"

With a gasp Incognita fell fainting to the floor.

It was some time before the sport could restore her to consciousness, but at last he succeeded, and she was a changed woman. Her face was hard and stern, and her manner cold and severe.

"You are not accountable for your father's crimes," she said, "but the gulf that now yawns between us can never be bridged. I loved you—loved you so much that I did not stop at anything in my desire to win you, and I shall now prove to you that I love you still."

As she spoke she gave a pull at a silken cord that hung near to where she stood, and in a few moments her "double" glided into her room.

"Go and bring my prisoner here," the queen ordered.

The "double" disappeared, and in a short time returned, bringing with her—*Minnie Denson*.

"Here," Incognita said, "is the one you love. I saw that she was winning you, and abducted her. Now, since all is over, I restore her to you."

With a glad cry, then, Minnie sprang into Jean's arms.

"Go! go from my sight!" the Faro Queen ordered imperatively. "Let the past be swept into oblivion!"

Quickly they left her presence, and Jean led Minnie home in triumph, telling her on the way of the death of Colonel Dallas and of the revelations of the previous night.

That afternoon a horrible report flew through the town. Incognita, the Faro Queen had killed herself! And the report was true. She had visited a lawyer and turned all her property over in due form to her assistant, or "double," and then returning to the Enchanted Hall had placed a revolver to her heart and fired, falling dead instantly. No one could account for her rash act, but when, later, all the secrets of the Hall were made known, it was believed that she was partly insane.

And that night "Kentucky Jean" disappeared.

He left no clew as to where he was going, and no word, except that he would not be seen again until the day of the trial at Denver.

The day of the trial came, the trial of Mrs. Sibyl Gernett Mourton against the Imperial Mining Company—as the case now stood; and the place of justice was crowded.

As the case progressed it became clearly evident that the woman must win.

One witness called was the detective who had been engaged to find the missing heirs, and when he took the stand he was recognized as the same tramp-like fellow whom we have seen in the office of Dobson & Blake. And the story he told was the story as we have told it here.

After him was called Mr. Jean Mourton.

Then came a surprise for everybody. The tramp-like detective stood up, made a few rapid changes in his appearance, such as casting off his old coat, removing his false hair and beard, etc., and lo! in his place stood "Kentucky Jean," the "Youthful Sport from Yellow Pine."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FINIS.

BUT little more remains to be told.

The legal battle was won by the rightful heirs and the Imperial Mining Company had to surrender the property to Sibyl Mourton and make to her a long accounting.

The true will of Philip Denson was found, and Charlie and Minnie, with their mother, had their property restored to them.

Willis and Annie Gray proved to be the children of the Mrs. Gray whose name was signed to Sibyl Gernett's certificate of marriage, and she, Sibyl, remembered them as children. She gave Annie a home with her for the present.

"Jared Kenneth," otherwise John Kent, was made to restore his wife to her rights, and then he was dealt with according to law, as were all the other rascals who had been cast into jail through Kentucky Jean's work.

The two mysterious shots fired, one at Kenneth and the other at Blue-eyed Belle, were fired by Annie Kent, as she confessed. They were fired in fits of hatred, when the woman's mind was almost unsettled.

Willis Gray remained cashier of the bank, and has become an honored and respected man. He soon made a home for his sister, and she, with her little girl, are all in all to him.

Hans Kepplehem and Euphemia Wiggins were married in due time, and it is to be hoped, were happy ever after.

"General Orrion Wade" and "Major Theobald Miles" grasped hands "across the bloody chasm," so to say, and their papers were soon made one, which still flourishes. It is called "*The Bow and Arrow*," and is a lively sheet.

Two years after the events recorded, there was a grand double wedding at Bended Bow, the contracting parties being Charlie Denson and Belle Mourton—or "Blue-eyed Belle," and Jean Mourton—"Kentucky Jean"—and Minnie Denson.

Jean and Minnie now live at Denver, Jean's mother with them; while Charlie and Belle remain at Bended Bow, Charlie's mother living with him. And all are rich and happy.

Rube Rittens, too, is now at Denver, in the employ of Jean. His old housekeeper, Aunt Dinah, is dead.

Peleg Green holds Rube's old place in the Break o' Day Mine, and is liked by all who know him.

Gardner Gernett, the Englishman, spent a year at Denver, and then returned home, happy in what he had done to repair the wrong he had done his brother in life.

Of the others who have played more or less important roles in our romance, we will speak in brief. Suffice it to say that some were rewarded and some were punished, according as they were good or evil.

"Colonel Damon Dallas" lies buried at Bended Bow, where a plain stone marks his grave, and on that stone are simply the name as above, and the date of his death.

And so we take our leave of them, one and all, and close the book.

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